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THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
A POSTMODERNIST AESTHETICS  
IN THE FICTION OF JOHN BARTH  
FROM *THE FLOATING OPERA* TO  
*LETTERS*

submitted by Richard Adrian Bradbury  
for the degree of PhD  
in the Department of English Literature  
at the University of Glasgow  
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This study of the development of a postmodernist aesthetics in the novels of John Barth from The Floating Opera to LETTERS has three main purposes. First, demonstrating that this development has taken place - albeit not in a simple linear fashion - from the early dissatisfactions with the realist mode to a complete postmodernist form. Secondly, reinforcing this claim by employing a variety of critical methods to prduce a detailed analysis of the works and examining some of the weaknesses inherent in a structuralist reading of Barth's fiction. Finally, analysing Barth's relationship with the various forms of postmodernism.

This work is a study of the development of one writer's craft from his earliest published works to the volume in which he achieves a voice both distinctively postmodernist and distinctively his own.

In order to do this I have engaged in a close examination of the progress of his novels from the early dissatisfaction with realism towards a mode of writing which is firmly, if idiosyncratically, situated within the tenets of postmodernism. Along that road there have been excursions which may have been productive in themselves but which have also been, in my estimation, necessary culs-de-sac in his development. And not merely for Barth, although his writings are the sole focus here, but also for the development of postmodern fiction in general. For Barth has been the epitome of postmodern writing from the earliest days of the term; the postmodernist for many readers. This has led to repeated forms of experimentation on his part, because he has been acutely aware of the responsibilities of the creative writer who finds him or herself part of the avant-garde during the last thirty years. And, in the nature of experimentation there is always an element of failure.

This argument, though, begs the question of the nature of postmodernism itself. In the years since it was first posited as a critical term it has been developed, extended and modified until there exists not one postmodernism, but many postmodernisms. As I have worked towards an understanding of this term I have attempted (if only by implication) to allow for other

employments of the term beyond the ways in which I have applied to John Barth. Indeed, many of the alternative applications are inimical to my own in that they see the synthetic impulse which I identify as crucial to Barth's work as being at odds with the celebration of fragmentariness and incompleteness which is characteristic of the more philosophically directed versions. I am not attempting to be definitive, in the sense of exclusive, but rather I am trying to establish a number of critical tools with which to develop an understanding of Barth's writing.

In order to do this, I have found it necessary to employ a range of critical methods not often seen in each other's company. This has been quite conscious, for I believe that only in the dialectic between methods will we make progress. Too much contemporary criticism has had itself as its focus rather than the proper concern of literary criticism: literature. For that reason, I have been consciously eclectic. Employing structuralist methods and the techniques of conventional literary criticism when it seemed necessary as part of the detailed examination of the texts; turning to history at other points when the wider contexts have needed consideration. I hope that this has produced a productive interplay of ideas rather than a methodological mess.

As my discussion of Barth's texts moves away from an analysis of what they mean, of their philosophical structure, and towards a discussion of how they mean, of their aesthetic structure, the impetus behind this

whole thesis begins to emerge. My contentions are, first, that there is a correspondence between Barth's idea that 'reality' is linguistically constructed and apprehended, and the work of structuralist theoreticians and critics. Secondly, that Barth's work is open to a structuralist analysis; that the theoretical frameworks of criticisms based on Saussurean and post-Saussurean linguistics provide a means by which a number of insights into Barth's work will be revealed. And thirdly, and this will emerge towards the end, that structuralist thinking needs augmentation from other theoretical sources if it is to offer anything resembling an account of Barth's work and development.

At the same time, Barth's engagement with postmodernism has shown that there are a number of paradigmatic ways in which the practising and self-conscious writer can come to terms with the critical world around him. As postmodernism has advanced in critical works, at least four channels of possibility have opened up for writers. First, to carry on as if nothing had happened in the same 'old modernist' way. Secondly, to repudiate the whole project of modernism and argue for a return to 'the good old days' of realism. Thirdly, to establish a new advance camp in the lands of experimentation. Fourthly, to attempt the synthesis of modernism and premodernism into a position which acts as a transcension of both. Barth's progress may not have followed all these possibilities, but he has shown an awareness of their existence.

The design of the text is simplicity itself. It moves through the texts in chronological order: from the early dissatisfactions with the discourse of realism to the first experiments in vast irrationalism and allegorical fiction, to the painfully self-aware and self-crippling short works, to the triumph of synthesis that is Letters. It is towards this novel that my work points, and I have attempted by implication to show the ways in which Barth, too, has moved towards this tour de force. For this reason I have not considered Sabbatical and The Tidewater Tales in anything more than the most peripheral fashion. The other consideration has been that in writing about a still-living writer one must draw a more or less arbitrary line across the work at some point if one is not to find oneself altogether too close to Tristram Shandy's predicament.

Each critical chapter examines a text for itself, analysing and assessing its contribution to the forward motion of the development. Between these chapters the text has also applied itself to a series of broader critical questions as they have occurred. These chapters try to place Barth within the wider contexts of his writing and it is only for reasons of space that I have excluded any direct commentary on his varying relationship to the world of contemporary American history and politics since the mid-1950s.

But always at the centre of the work is John Barth and his writing. The initial impulses behind this study began in that hiatus in Barth's writing between the

publication of Chimera and the appearance of Letters. At that time it seemed that he had stumbled into, at worst, silence or, at best, a self-reflexivity so acute that his own difficulties with writing had become a primary subject-matter. With the publication of Letters, the subsequent appearance of Sabbatical and The Tidewater Tales, his writing has undergone a revival which has restored him to a level of production close to that which he enjoyed in the 1960s. This is no coincidence, because it is his synthetic ability - his capacity to combine self-reflexivity, a clear awareness of the state of the novel, and a sheer joy in narration - which is his strongest attribute and the clearest point of comparison between those earlier works and the writing of the last ten years. In an era of increasing specialisation he is an eclectic, summoning his material from wherever he finds it. From Scheherazade to the machinations of the CIA, from the labyrinths of colonial Maryland politics to the state of the university today. All is grist to his fabulous mill.

From the very first I was absorbed, and continue to be delighted, by his zest for narrative. In the numerous conversations and exchanges I have had with other of his critics in Britain, the United States and Poland this has been the constant factor. If nothing more, this is an appreciation of a teller of tales who, at his best, can be compared to his own heroine: that mistress of the art of story-telling, Scheherazade.

The Floating Opera:  
dissatisfaction with realism  
as comedy



The Floating Opera is, with the possible exceptions of the three novels published in the last ten years (Letters, Sabbatical and The Tidewater Tales), John Barth's least discussed book. It is generally regarded as a prelude to the later, more substantial works; "a mere foothill on the way to the more mountainous bulk of The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy"; a volume in which Barth is tuning his piano. Despite Stephen Tanner's remark in 1971 that "Already he is showing up as the subject of theses and dissertations, and his novels, particularly The Floating Opera, are frequently selected for college courses in contemporary literature"<sup>2</sup>, the usual tone of critical work dealing with this novel was set by Stanley Hyman when he wrote

The principal sign of immaturity in The Floating Opera is sentimentality. Some of Todd's memories of his father suggest soap opera, and there is a mistaken effort to relate Todd's change of mind about killing himself to a concern with the Macks' little daughter Jeannine (who may in fact be Todd's daughter). Otherwise the book is quite an achievement for a man of 26. Barth has since gone far beyond it. I can hardly conceive a limit to his eventual achievement.<sup>3</sup>

Hyman's argument, though, is based on a bowdlerised version of Barth's text, published in 1956. It is only since the appearance of the original text in 1967 that any substantial criticism has been devoted to the novel, and it is to this later edition that I shall turn as a basis for my comments. There are, however, several post-1967 critical works which have insisted on ignoring the existence of this edition, have concentrated their remarks on the 1956 edition and have thereby introduced into their arguments a series of flaws by working with a text shaped

and weakened by the demands of a publisher rather than by the conscious intentions of its author.

I will first give an account of the changes that were made for the 1967 edition. They are of two sorts, textual revision and the restoration of the original conclusion to the novel. David Morrell and Enoch Jordan detail two kinds of revision. First, "cutting words that seemed redundant or that impeded the flow of a sentence".<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the adjustment to the arrangement of the chapters in the last quarter of the book -

Barth also cut one brief chapter of philosophy titled "Another premise to swallow" (repetitive and overly didactic), and then rearranged several incidents in the last quarter. The best way to illustrate this is to set some of the chapter headings side by side

1956	1967
XXII A tour of the opera	XXII A tour of the opera
XIII Another premise to swallow	(omitted)
XIV So long, so long	XXIII So long, so long
XXV Three million dollars	XXIV Three million dollars
XXVI The Inquiry	XXV The Inquiry
XXVII Will you smile at my rowboat?	XXVI The first step
XXVIII The Floating Opera	XXVII The floating Opera
XXIX A parenthesis, a happy ending, a Floating Opera	XXVIII A parenthesis
	XXIX The Floating Opera <sup>5</sup>

Jordan suggests that "by omitting one chapter and reordering plot episodes, Barth tightens the novel's structure and satisfies our expectations regarding fictional structure"<sup>6</sup>. The restoration of the original conclusion involved making changes to the events surrounding Todd's decision not to commit suicide. In the 1956 edition, Todd turns on the gas taps and settles back to await death below the stage. He is disturbed by a noise in the next cabin, which turns out to be Jeannine having a seizure. Concern for her leads him to change his mind about committing suicide. In the 1967 edition, Todd turns

on the gas taps and returns to await death whilst watching the climax of the performance on the 'Floating Opera'. When nothing happens he concludes that one of the crew must have turned off the gas and from this he arrives at his attitude of 'why bother?', the concluding philosophical stance of the book. In Morrell's words

the important consequence of all these changes is that Todd Andrews becomes a more consistent and convincing character who now at last does indeed "attribute to abstract ideas a life-or-death significance".<sup>7</sup>

I would go further than Morrell and argue that through these changes Barth restores the philosophical consistency of his argument and, as Enoch Jordan argues through close textual analysis, tightens the novel's structure, rids it of discursive repetition by omitting the original chapter XIII, "another premise to swallow", and sharpens the comic line which begins in chapter XI.

My second task is to pause and glance at the initial response of the reviewers to the publication of The Floating Opera because they identify, and rail against, elements in the novel which have subsequently been recognised as part of Barth's positive contribution to the art of the novel.

If prizes were offered for strangely constructed novels, this one would win hands down ... I doubt if anyone will question Barth's cleverness. He shows more ability in handling the structure of his novel than I have seen in a long time. Lack of confidence, unfortunately, has led Barth to stoop to sensationalism and vulgarity which add nothing to the characters or structure of the novel.<sup>8</sup>

a virtuoso exercise by a master-puppeteer<sup>9</sup>

The book is amusing and revolting in turn, and Mr. Barth has neatly adapted the techniques and elaborate story-telling paraphernalia of such eighteenth-century writers as Fielding and Sterne, putting new life into old genres.<sup>10</sup>

And, perhaps most significantly, "Once the Shandean pretensions are adjusted to, the book offers some enjoyment". Significantly, because a reading of The Floating Opera demands that the reader abandon expectations acquired from reading realist novels, and move towards a manner of reading the possibility of which was first indicated in English by Lawrence Sterne in Tristram Shandy. And also because Barth, through his use of humour in many forms, is constantly seeking to amuse and entertain his readers during the course of the pursuit of philosophical and aesthetic ideas. It is a rigorous self-consciousness and confidence which allows the author to distance himself sufficiently from his narrator so that such passages as 'tuning my piano' can appear in the text.

Much criticism has neglected, or forgotten, the importance of this opening chapter, which treads the tightrope between authorial and narrative voices in the same way as the more obvious and clumsier 'calliope music'. In its position as initial chapter 'tuning my piano' succeeds in both blurring the distinction between authorial and narrative voices and, at the same time, makes us aware that there is a distance between the two. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that Barth goes to greater lengths to examine and emphasise this distinction in his later work, it would be unwise to ignore its presence in The Floating Opera.

Perhaps the best example of this simultaneous action occurs in the following passage

It always seemed a fine idea to me to build a showboat with just one big fat open deck on it, and to keep a play going continuously. The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up

and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along both banks. They would catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past, and then they'd have to wait until the tide ran back again to catch another snatch of it, if they still happened to be sitting there. To fill in the gaps they'd have to use their imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbours, or hear the word passed along from upriver or downriver. Most times they wouldn't understand what was going on at all, or they'd think they knew, when actually they didn't. Lots of times they'd be able to see the actors, but not hear them. I needn't explain that that's how much of life works: our friends float past; we become involved with them; they float on, and we must rely on hearsay or lose track of them completely; they float back up again, and we either renew our friendship - catch up to date - or find they and we don't comprehend each other anymore. And that's how this book will work, I'm sure. It's a floating opera, friend, fraught with curiosities, melodrama, spectacle, instruction, and entertainment, but it floats willy-nilly on the tide of my vagrant prose: you'll catch sight of it, lose it, spy it again; and it may require the best efforts of your attention and imagination - together with patience, if you're an average fellow - to keep track of the plot as it sails in and out of view.<sup>12</sup>

Here, a fine balance is achieved between the two voices, whereby one is made aware of the triple-layered structure of the novel. Todd describes the way in which life works via the 'floating opera' metaphor and at the same time Barth describes the way in which the content of the book is provisional upon Todd's observations. The shift from using the floating opera as a metaphor for life to using it as a metaphor for the way in which the novel is constructed, which begins at "And that's how this book will work", is clearest proof of this. Barth is imposing a form on Todd's structuring of the content of the novel. Thus, for Todd the floating opera is a metaphor for the way in which life works, whereas for Barth the floating opera as a metaphor for life is dependent on Todd's consciousness. The floating opera as an artistic metaphor is an indication of the way in which Todd must write because of his perception of the world. For Todd, the two aspects of the metaphor are indistinguishable but for

Barth, the author of *Todd*, the two are separable. As LeClair writes, "his (Todd's) approach to life and his approach to art interpenetrate, are one".<sup>13</sup> On the other hand Barth elides the differences between the terms of art and reality to the point at which both become problematic, but never fully confused one with the other. Indeed, this elision provides much of the dynamic in his later work (most obviously in *The Sot-Weed Factor*). Within this structure, both author and narrator are free to test, and tamper with, the reader's reading. The concluding lines of 'tuning my piano' are a clear challenge to the reader, and a forewarning of the difficulties and games that lie ahead.

The first of these difficulties is thrown up by the style of the novel, of which Stanley Hyman has written

There are periodic roman candles and pinwheels of rhetoric, and the narrative style is an elaborate mock-dialogue with the reader. We are treated to such *Tristram Shandy* devices as breaking the page into repetitive double columns (one for each eye) and ending two chapters with the same formula (on the grounds that the first occasion was premature). The pages that reproduce the Floating Opera handbill typographically and describe the performance in detail give us a foretaste of Barth's Nabokovian talent for elaborate, spurious documentation.<sup>14</sup>

Richard Schickel has written in greater depth than Hyman when he argues that it is

a wayward, quirky, but highly charged style in which the conversational varies with the formal, the flowery with the direct, the vulgar with the sensitive. The overall effect is that of an elderly man, engaged in a rambling monologue whilst sunning himself on a park bench.

He then goes beyond mere description towards explication with the following

Thus, his style (that is, the style created for him by Barth) meets the only intelligent criterion which can be applied to

it; it is the accurate expression of the man. The quality of the tale he tells is utterly inseparable from the quality of voice in which he tells it. Neither could exist without the other, and it is impossible to say whether style formed character or vice versa.<sup>15</sup>

This latter remark seems to me to be accurate, because it recognises the inseparable link between form and content, between the language on the page and the philosophical conclusions arrived at in The Floating Opera. Briefly, if a realist structure implies a teleology and a raison d'être, a novel which in its content denies both of these cannot have a structure which is concerned with them (without running into a wall of contradictions which could very well reduce it to being unreadable). Therefore, when Barth steps beyond this realist content, he must also step beyond this structure. If we take Tom Jones as an example of a novel which has a plot geared towards the restoration and assertion of order, through its absorption of Tom into society, it is possible to see this teleological structure at work. As John Preston has written, in The Created Self, we

find ourselves drawn into the confusion and hazard of the action, aware now of 'history' as a process in which we are involved, moving towards effects we cannot predict: we are not allowed to understand more of the course of events than the characters do. Yet, as we have seen, this kind of involvement is only possible on the first reading. Fielding has written into the narrative an assumption that must be contradicted by subsequent readings. Indeed, one cannot read even once through the book without finding many passages have come to take on an altered meaning.<sup>16</sup>

This altered meaning being that the book has an overarching structure and order which determines that every event, however disparate from the central action, plays a part in the architectonic construction of the novel.

It is against this sense of order that The Floating Opera rebels in its content, and a knowledge of the history of the novel would offer up that most 'typical' work of fiction Tristram Shandy as an example of the possibilities contained within the rejection of teleological, realist structures. Parenthetically, Barth has written that

when I wrote The Floating Opera ... I was very much under the influence of a Brazilian novelist whom I'd just come across, Machado de Assis - who, in turn, though he wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, was very much under the influence of Tristram Shandy; the same kind of technical playfulness and similar view of the world. So I got my Sterne by way of Brazil.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst I do not believe that Barth's use of the 'shandean' form is slavish (indeed I feel that there is considerable irony in the use of such a similar form for such dissimilar ends - not least of which is the divergence between Tristram's absorption with the world and with writing about it, and Todd's rational and rationalised desire to quit the world because of his consciousness of himself as a detached observer), this account does go some way to explaining the formal process at work in The Floating Opera. Which, of course, leads us to the question, what is the content of The Floating Opera; what is it about? Unlike Richard Schickel, I do not believe that

Given the structure of the novel, there is only one way for the critic to approach it. That is to follow precisely in the footsteps of Todd Andrews as he proceeds on his rounds through Cambridge this hot June day.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, it is possible to remove oneself sufficiently from the text to be able to view it, as it were,



architectonically, as a whole, as a discernible path, however waywardly trodden it may be. In fact, this path, this philosophical argument, complete with its digressions, is the substance of the book. Without an understanding of its twists and turns seen as a whole, The Floating Opera becomes no more than Schickel's rambling monologue of an old man.

To demonstrate this, I wish to take the first chapter of the novel, 'tuning my piano', and show how it indicates a number of thematic and stylistic devices that will dominate the text. The most immediately obvious thing about this chapter, as we have seen, is its overt establishment and use of the narrative voice of Todd Andrews. Much that is elaborated later concerning Todd's character and world view is intimated here. Indeed, in the paragraph beginning, "Todd Andrews, then", we are given a basis of information upon which the novel builds as it progresses.

This is not merely descriptive detail - although it tells us that Todd is 6 feet tall, weighs 145 pounds, resembles Gregory Peck, is a lawyer, well off, lives on the eastern shore of Maryland, was educated at Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland Law School, fought in the First World War, is a bachelor, wears expensive clothes, smokes Robert Burns cigars, and drinks Sherbrook rye and ginger ale! We also discover a number of things about the way in which Todd views the world; that he has a wide range of interests, such as "sailing, drinking, walking the streets, writing my Inquiry, staring at walls, hunting ducks, and 'coons, reading, playing politics", but

that whilst "I'm interested in any number ,of things, (I'm) enthusiastic about nothing."<sup>13</sup> Even more importantly, though, we discover that "I have my own system, but it's unorthodox."<sup>14</sup> These last two points are verified in the main body of the text, and their importance spreads throughout the story proper (the conventional plot and narrative) of the novel. We are confronted again by Todd's interests in, and opinions on, an enormously wide range of matters from the ethics of work to the merits of maryland beaten biscuits, from the nature of literary symbolism to possible reasons for committing suicide. This is the basis upon which the Inquiry is written, that

to understand any one thing entirely, no matter how minute requires the understanding of every other thing in the world.<sup>21</sup>

Related to this is the implicit demand that we discover, through reading the text, the systematic basis for Todd's reasoning in the 'Inquiry' and in his questions about suicide. There is, we are told, a methodology underlying Todd's approach to understanding the world but it is an unorthodox methodology which we can only decipher by reading the novel. But, alongside these statements there are also a number of inconsistencies in this paragraph. As Thomas LeClair writes, the resemblance to Gregory Peck claimed by Todd is "one of a number of minor incongruities the reader shrugs off."<sup>22</sup> More importantly, the bald statement "I am in no hurry" is explicitly contradicted when, in chapter 2, Todd leaps out of bed and decides to commit suicide

It was at some moment during the performance of this ritual- the instant when the cold water met my face seems a probable one - that all things in heaven and earth came clearer to me, and I realised that this day I would make my last; I would destroy myself on this day.<sup>23</sup>

It is at this early point in the text that we see one of the crucial movements of the text at work. Briefly, it is the presentation of one form of understanding the world, a massive rational understanding, which is then contradicted by Todd's actual practice. Remember, The Floating Opera is the story of the day Todd changed his mind. The contradiction between Todd's statement of methodology and his actual behaviour is one of the crucial driving forces in the text.

Also, importantly, this contradiction enables us to distinguish between the narratorial and authorial voices in the text. If we, as readers, are able to identify these incongruities, we must doubt the veracity of the narrator's account of the events and of himself. We must make a series of judgements and conscious decisions about the status of the narrator's statements in the text. Are we to believe what he tells us about himself at a descriptive level? And, more importantly, we must make a critical judgement on the validity of his philosophical statements as they are put into practice. The separation of these two levels is important because, whilst we have no specific reason to believe or disbelieve Todd's self-descriptive statements, we do have a basis upon which to make decisions about his judgements of the world. Statements such as "My teeth are sound, except for one filing in my lower left rear molar and a crown on my upper right canine"<sup>24</sup> are completely enclosed within the text

and have no possible recourse to the world beyond the text. They recreate a level of reality which is completely autonomous and self-reliant (provided of course that the reader had the necessary level of linguistic competence to understand the combinations of words being presented). On the other hand, statements like 'I needn't explain that that's how much of life works'<sup>25</sup> are open to a critical assessment, i.e. our own experience and theories of 'how much of life works'. And statements of this ilk are open to acceptance or rejection by the reader; they create the basis upon which the reader can examine and critically assess the text. The most obvious example of this is the shift from floating opera as an artistic metaphor to floating opera as a metaphor for life, as outlined already. The former metaphor is a textual fact, although of course it is open to a criticism of the extent to which it is actually practiced, whereas the latter is open to a philosophical criticism, a criticism which resides in the world beyond the text.

Finally, this opening chapter raises the question of the status we afford to the book as a whole, as a statement of Todd's intentions and opinions. He says of this introductory chapter

Perhaps when I've finished describing that particular day I mentioned before - I believe it was about June 21, 1937 - perhaps when I reach the bedtime of that day, if ever, I'll come back and destroy these pages of piano-tuning. Or perhaps not.<sup>26</sup>

At one level this is plainly Barth playing elaborate games, because the text exists, even down to the statement of these doubts about the usefulness of these initial words. At another they raise the question of the

provisional ontology of the text, of its dubious status as an accurate expression of Todd's life and opinions.

Practically, we accept the text; but we should retain our critical doubt of the veracity of this linguistically created reality and recognise that it could be abandoned in favour of an alternative account. If any one part of the text comes into doubt, the rest of the text is drawn into that doubt. This theme, here stated peripherally, advances towards the centre of Barth's writing in his later work.

One question, with all its ramifications, lies at the heart of the novel. It is the question asked by Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus; the question asked by Hamlet in Shakespeare's play; -

There is but one truly philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.<sup>27</sup>

Evelyn Glaser-Wohrer, in her essentially philosophical study of Barth, has situated this question, and the philosophy of nihilism, firmly at the heart of The Floating Opera -

The conflict leading to this basic nihilism in the book lies in the apperception of man's aspiration towards rational behaviour and his basic animality. Man is portrayed as being ruled by his emotions against his will<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, Glaser-Wohrer's account of Todd as a character 'confronting the irrationality of existence' is convincing as a philosophical account of this novel. This has two strands to it; first, that

It is obvious that Todd is meant to represent the human being who tries to grasp the absolute knowledge of why and how the

universe functions, but he is finally forced to realise that such a high level of awareness is unattainable

This recognition comes through Todd's inability to explain his father's death through systematic and logical questioning. The second strand centres on the "apperception(*sic*) of man's aspiration towards rational behaviour and his basic animality"<sup>29</sup>. Because Todd has established rational analysis as an absolute early in his life, the inability of rationality to explain his place in the world leads him to the belief that there are no absolute values.

Glaser-Wohrer is certainly right in her perception of the philosophical texture of the novel, and her discussion of the underlying nihilism in the text points in the right direction. However, her discussion of the 'function of the aesthetic artifice', whilst moving towards an understanding of this aspect of The Floating Opera through such statements as

these narrative devices do not aim exclusively at the readers' entertainment; they are, above all, Barth's manifestation that he is aware of his literary past and thus employs some of the means in a parodic sense. In addition to this they reflect artistically the main theme of the novel: the absurdity of the world.<sup>30</sup>

and

Barth's ultimate aim in this novel, as well as in those following The Floating Opera, is to portray how difficult it is for the artist to grasp reality; the attempt is bound to fail because reality is too multifarious. The artist, representing the searching and creative mind, is led to a fictionalisation of reality and of our existence.<sup>31</sup>

does not have much insight into how the text becomes readable.

Stephen Tanner is moving towards an understanding of the elements which make The Floating Opera a novel, rather than "a treatise, clothed in narrative, about the nihilistic concept of the relativity of value"<sup>32</sup> when he writes

There are two main themes, one growing out of the other. The first is the conflict between the mind and the heart, and the second is the to-be-or-not-to-be question. The first theme centres on the father-child relationships represented by Todd and his father, Todd and Jeannine, Colonel Mack and his son. The second theme is reflected in the numerous references to Hamlet, Todd's father's suicide, Mr. Haecker's suicide, and Todd's planned suicide.<sup>33</sup>,

What is significant here is the reference to the manner in which the text is developed within itself. He takes cognizance of the fact that the characters and the narrative both complement and stand beyond the philosophical nihilism of the text. By this I mean that whilst the novel has an extractable philosophical content, this content is welded into the text by the creation of a fictional reality in which the logic of the philosophy provides the forward momentum. It is the elements of plot, of characterisation, and of a sense of literary history, which give The Floating Opera its memorable qualities. To underplay the part played by the realised authorial imagination is to eliminate one of the most distinctive parts of Barth's reputation and standing as a novelist. The ideas, the philosophical structures, of the novel are underpinned by a clear sense of the qualities which make the novel 'lisible'<sup>34</sup>. This is clearest at those points in the novel at which Todd contradicts his philosophical statements, because it is at these points that the overall

conjunction of philosophical treatise and novel is brought into relief.

Thus, the novel creates a reality in which abstractions have a life-or-death significance but at the same time this reality is placed alongside, and implicitly compared with, a world of compromising humanity in which the philosophical abstractions are mitigated by the business of living. Hence the superficially contradictory levels of 'fussy' realism (the endless detailing) and the absolutes of the philosophical debate (which transcend that realism ironically at such points as Todd's inability to remember the date of the day on which he changed his mind).

Todd, through the Inquiry, comes close to the figure who "creates an illusion about the things he cannot understand and he resembles therefore a fiction-writer creating meaning where perhaps there is none"<sup>35</sup>.

By insisting on aesthetic artifice, Todd is able to construct a bulwark against the acceptance of personal and universal irrationality; art posits meaning, a momentary stay against encroaching confusion.<sup>36</sup>

This is an accurate summation of the underlying dynamic behind the writing of The Floating Opera, and also behind the movement of Todd to the point at which he writes

So, I begin each day with a gesture of cynicism, and close it with a gesture of faith; or, if you prefer, begin it by reminding myself that, for me at least, goals and objectives are without value, and close it by demonstrating that the fact is irrelevant. A gesture of temporality, a gesture of eternity. It is in the tension between these two gestures that I have lived my adult life.<sup>37</sup>

Or, more succinctly, "There's no final reason for living (or for suicide)". Reality is so multiple that any account



of it is inevitably provisional. But the recognition of this fact is in no sense an impediment to attempting an account of that reality as an attempt to hold encroaching confusion at bay. This confusion is epitomised, in Todd, by the question "who am I?". His answer rests on the construction of a series of masks - rake, saint, cynic - which sustain him until Jane's question about his clubbed fingers (a symptom of the heart disease which could at any moment bring all of Todd's questioning and confusion to an end) forces him to the recognition that he cannot answer this question. Living depends upon there being a reason to live, and "there's no final reason for living". "(Or for suicide)". Todd's arrival at a 'why bother' attitude is the conclusion of his nihilism and is demonstrated by the construction of the text, by the narrative, by the elision together in one sentence of the two halves of the proposition. This attitude is best exemplified in the words

It occurred to me, for example, that faced with an infinitude of possible directions and having no ultimate reason to choose one over another, I would in all probability, though not at all necessarily, go on behaving much as I had hitherto, as a rabbit shot on the run keeps running in the same direction until death overtakes him.<sup>32</sup>

Barth has gone as far as he could with the character of Todd, within the limitations imposed on the construction of character imposed by the structure of The Floating Opera, and Todd leaves us, musing

I considered too whether, in the real absence of absolutes, values less than absolute mightn't be regarded as in no way inferior and even be lived by. But that's another inquiry and another story.<sup>33</sup>

It is at this point that I can return to an earlier part of my discussion, and re-examine the philosophical argument of The Floating Opera since a number of things remain to be said. The restoration of the original ending highlights a crucial point: Todd's reason for finally changing his mind and not committing suicide, and the implications that this has for an estimation of the text. Stephen Tanner's use of the 1956 text means that he fundamentally misunderstands Todd's argument, as restored in 1967, and he interprets the sentimentality of Todd's concern for Jeannine as being consistent with the rest of the philosophical argument. This is wrong, because, as so many critics noted at the time, this constitutes a shift in Todd's argument which is sudden and unprepared. But many are the ways in which the commercial concerns of a publisher may reappear to lead the critic astray! The revised conclusion is at least consistent (albeit as a radically different re-statement of the tenets of existentialism and nihilism). If there are no final absolutes or reasons for action then, of course, "there is no final reason for living (or for suicide)".

Todd's retreat from the principle of 'engagement' to a position where nothing really matters is, to be sure, anti-climactic, but, in his own words

If you do not understand at once that the end of my story must be undramatic, then again I'm cursed with imperfect communication. Say what you wish about the formal requirements of storytelling; this is my opera, and I'll lead you out of it as gently as I led you in. I've little use, as a principle, for slam-bang finishes like Burley Joe's.<sup>40</sup>

This is very far from Camus's

And I, too, felt ready to start life over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifferences of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, made me realise that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still. For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained was to hope that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me howls of execration.<sup>41</sup>

But it is consistent with Todd's development of comic nihilism. I shall return to a discussion of this development and its philosophical and aesthetic consequences at the end of chapter 2, but for now it is sufficient to remember that Barth's intention was, on the one hand, to search "strenuously for the radical articulation of the individual mind, the outsider's vision"<sup>42</sup> and, on the other, to write a nihilistic comedy. Or, in Todd's words, "this is, after all a pleasure dip I'm inviting you to, not a baptism".<sup>43</sup> Here, we see form and content beginning to draw together.

Finally, the antagonism which still remains at one level between the form of the novel and its extractable philosophical content must be resolved. This antagonism also emerges between Todd's nihilism and Barth's novel as a concrete example of the construction of philosophical and aesthetic barriers against the encroaching confusion which inspires the nihilistic content of the text. Todd's pronouncement that nothing has value must be seen from the perspective of being written within the context of a novel which, by its very structuring of experience, implies a value in the aesthetic structuring of its content. The nature of the text's existence is complementary to its philosophical content, but the fact of its existence is in

contradiction to this content. The resolution of this contradiction is attempted in The End of the Road, through a shift in the relationship of form and content. The End of the Road represents a clarification, an untangling, of two philosophical threads that had become intertwined in The Floating Opera; namely, those of existentialism and nihilism. This untangling is represented by the use of a new form; by writing a new text which, in Barth's terms, moves away from a comic nihilism and toward a tragedy of some sort.

The End of the Road:  
dissatisfaction with realism  
as nihilistic tragedy

Barth's intention to write "a series of novels dramatising various nihilistic attitudes"<sup>1</sup> is continued in The End of the Road, and he explained in a letter to the Library Journal in 1956 that

the plot of one would not be carried into the plot of another, ..., nor would they have specific characters in common. But they would, ..., all have one similar character, some sort of bachelor, more or less irresponsible, who rejects absolute values or encounters their rejection.<sup>2</sup>

Taken at this level, it is easy to see the parallel structures of The Floating Opera and The End of the Road: both have some sort of bachelor who becomes involved in a ménage à trois with a married couple as the central character and shaping consciousness behind the text. This is the underlying structure of both novels, the shape behind the two texts.

However, I would argue that beyond this basic pattern there are a number of divergences between the two texts. Most obvious of these is the shift from the 'nihilistic comedy' of The Floating Opera to the 'nihilistic tragedy' of The End of the Road. Or, as Barth himself puts it

I deliberately had Todd end up with that brave ethical subjectivism in order that Jacob Horner might undo that position in number two and carry all non-mystical value-thinking to the end of the road.<sup>3</sup>

Before discussing this shift, it is useful perhaps to sketch out the other major divergences and then to return to them later. First, The End of the Road takes the traditions of realism as a starting point upon which it stands and launches an attack in a fashion very far from anything in The Floating Opera. Secondly, the discussion of language and linguistically created realities,

intimated peripherally in The Floating Opera, becomes a major theme and structuring device in this book.

Chronologically, The End of the Road begins with Jacob Horner falling into a state of paralysis in Pennsylvania Railroad Station, unable to decide where he wants to go -

I left the ticket window and took a seat at one of the benches in the middle of the concourse to make up my mind. And it was there that I simply ran out of motives, as a car runs out of gas. There was no reason to go to Crestline, Ohio. Or Dayton, Ohio; or Lima, Ohio. There was no reason, either, to go back to the apartment hotel, or for that matter to go anywhere. There was no reason to do anything. My eyes, as Winckleman said inaccurately of the eyes of the Greek statues, were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy, and when that is the case there is no reason to do anything - even to change the focus of one's eyes. Which is perhaps why the statues stand still. It is the malady cosmopsis, the cosmic view, that afflicted me. When one has it, one is frozen like the bullfrog when the hunter's light strikes him full in the eyes, only with cosmopsis there is no hunger, and no quick hand to terminate the moment - there's only the light.<sup>4</sup>

He is saved from remaining in this state indefinitely by the Doctor who introduces him, via the existentialist doctrine that existence precedes essence, to mythotherapy, to the construction of a self through a series of arbitrary activities. Part of these activities is the obtaining of a job teaching prescriptive grammar - and thus Jake begins to live his life according to a series of given rules. Beyond these rules, he is nothing; he is weatherless, he is the bust of Laocöon, upon which all moods and expressions can be imposed. Whilst teaching at Wicomico State College he meets Joe Morgan, who is convinced that absolute values do not exist but denies

the fallacy that because a value isn't intrinsic, objective, and absolute, it somehow isn't real.<sup>5</sup>

It is the conflict between these two ways of living, symbolised by the struggle for possession of Rennie, that

shapes the action of The End of the Road. The novel separates, and brings into conflict, the two strands of existentialism and nihilism. The conflict between them, although presented as an engagement for possession of Rennie, is a philosophical struggle. At this point we have what at first sight seems, if we have The Floating Opera in our minds as we read The End of the Road, a paradox. This is that the ménage à trois, peripheral to the former novel, has now moved to centre stage, but at the same time has lost sexual possession as its mainspring. In the latter the forward motion of the plot is provided by the philosophically based conflict between Jake and Joe -

Rennie is the ethical vacuum on which both impose their abstract roles ... What begins as an ideological farce thus moves ... grimly and efficiently from comedy to tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

Jake's existentialism, exemplified by his adherence to mythotherapy and his insistence that it is only by role-playing that he can avoid cosmopsis, a complete paralysis of will, is complemented by his understanding that

to turn experience to speech - that is, to classify, to categorise, to conceptualise, to grammarise, to syntactify it - is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it.<sup>7</sup>

Horner refers here to the classification of experience, but in principle what he says applies to all 'rational' formulations, which - in Barth's view - distort rather than explain reality. This distortion even extends to the application of linguistic labels. 'Connoisseurs' recognise all rational formulations for the necessary expedients they are - useful devices that only seem to isolate what in reality is continuous, to homogenise what is really different, and to make permanent what is really shifting ... they never confuse the formulation of reality for reality itself.<sup>8</sup>

Joe Morgan on the other hand

understands the arbitrariness and relativity of all roles and values. But on this awareness he builds his own arbitrary but dogmatic system by which he lives ... his grounds for action are as arbitrary as Jacob's. He knows that his personal code is not



logically defensible, that it is subjective, and that he is right only from his own point of view. But what might for a man of the Enlightenment be the basis for a pluralistic and tolerant view of value becomes for Joe a personally absolute system on which he is as unyielding as the most committed ideologue.<sup>9</sup>

Given this philosophical paradigm as the basis for its structure the novel proceeds, via two important incidents, to dramatise this conflict. The first is the point at which Rennie and Jake spy on Joe and catch him

standing at the exact centre of the bare room, fully dressed, smartly executing military commands. About face! Right dress! 'Ten-shun! Parade rest! He saluted briskly, his cheeks blown out and his tongue extended, and then proceeded to cavort about the room - spinning, pirouetting, bowing leaping, kicking ... Passing a little mirror on the wall, Joe caught his own eye. What? What? Ahoy there! He stepped close, curtsied to himself, and thrust his face to within two inches of the glass. Mr. Morgan, it is? Howdy do, Mr. Morgan. Blah bloo blah. Oo-o-o-o blubblle thlwurp. He mugged antic faces at himself, sklurching up his eye corners, abloogling his mouth about, glubbing his cheeks ... The show then was over. Ah, but one moment - yes. He turned slightly, and we could see: his tongue gripped purposefully between his lips at the side of his mouth, Joe was masturbating and picking his nose at the same time.<sup>10</sup>

It is at this point, as Rennie says later in the novel, that Joe's system of rationality, and crucially her belief in it, begins to break down because he is caught in a ridiculous and completely irrational performance. The second is the act of adultery, and the subsequent analysis of it. Jake goes to great pains to demonstrate that the whole act is one continuum -

To reach the bathroom, she had to go through a little hallway off the living room; to get my jacket, I had to go to an open closet in this same hallway, and so it is still not quite necessary to raise an eyebrow at the fact that we got up from our chairs and went to the hallway together. There, if she turned to face me for a slight moment at the door of the bathroom, who's to say confidently that good nights were not on the tips of tongues? It happened that we embraced each other instead before we went our separate ways - but I think that a slow-motion camera would not have shown who moved first - and it happened further ( but I would say consequently) that our separate ways led to the same bed. By that time, if we had been consciously thinking of first steps - and I for one certainly wasn't - I'm sure we both would have assumed that the first

steps, whoever made them, had already been made. I mention this because it applies so often to people's reasoning about their behaviour in situations that later turn out to be regrettable: it is possible to watch the sky from morning to midnight, or move along the spectrum from infrared to ultraviolet, without ever being able to put your finger on the precise point where a qualitative change takes place; no one can say "It is exactly here that twilight becomes night", or blue becomes violet, or innocence guilt.<sup>11</sup>

This, implicitly, launches an assault on Joe's dissection of the world into rationally perceptible entities. Joe's increasing dogmatism, in the face of this double attack, and Jake's corresponding disillusion with his present persona, lead to a breakdown of the situation. The end of the road, as far as this setting is concerned, is now rapidly approached. This is a summary of the plot as conventionally realised; a philosophical progress from relativism to dogmatism, death and flight from the social world.

Clearly, then, the novel attempts answers at two questions. First, does life have any intrinsic value, or are the characters obliged to live according to a system with subjective absolutes? Secondly, of what does existence consist, how do the characters function from day to day? I write this because The End of the Road is a schematic text, designed explicitly to use events as a means towards asking, answering, philosophical questions. The events do not have the weight of autonomy ascribed to events in a realist novel. To take an extreme example: the 'mushroom collecting' chapter from Anna Karenina does not contribute to the philosophical content of the novel in as direct a fashion as the incidents in The End of the Road. The schematic nature of the book, in which characters

represent philosophical stances and abide by these stances, produces two possibilities.

First, the consequences of their philosophies have to be faced up to within the text - in this case the destruction of Rennie and the subsequent flights of Jake and Joe from Wicomico. This is indicated by the terse style of the final chapter. The sentences shorten and the text takes on a grim realism of quasi-reportage which culminates

And so this is the picture I have to carry with me: the Treatment Room dark except for the one ceiling floodlight that illuminated the table; Rennie dead there now, face mottled, eyes wide, mouth agape; the vomitus running from a pool in her mouth to a pool under her head; the great black belt lying finally unbuckled across the sheet over her chest and stomach; the lower part of her body nude and bloody, her legs trailing limply and clumsily on the end of the examination table.<sup>12</sup>

To be sure, the immediate cause of this death is the ingested sausage but the ultimate cause is ideas - the clash of ideas between Jake and Joe. Mental products acquire an equal force to physical realities. Secondly, direct didacticism becomes a real possibility, acceptable in the text. Indeed. it is these two elements of the text to which early reviewers pointed.

Sick-sick-sick, or maybe just foul ... this is for those schooled in the waste matter of the body and the mind; for others, a real recoil<sup>13</sup>

The book is tremendously engaging and contains many brilliant set-pieces, but cannot finally accomplish its ends because Barth has made his characters both insane and two-dimensional, whereas, to truly expose an ideology the novelist must show its effect on relatively whole human beings, just as biochemists trace the effect of a virus through the biological systems of a normal organism.<sup>14</sup>

Barth is clearly one of the most interesting of younger US writers and he has produced that rarity of US letters - a true novel of ideas.<sup>15</sup>

The plot sounds absurd, but beneath the comic surface questions are being raised regarding choice and meaning in life. The writing is very good, but may occasionally shock some readers.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, we have a tension being created between, on the one hand, the inescapable conclusions of the realism of the text and, on the other hand, the undermining of that realism by overt and schematic didacticism and by the text's increasing awareness of itself as text. The End of the Road draws upon the tradition of realist fiction in order to create itself. It has the sense of forward motion so often radically lacking in The Floating Opera. And yet this sense of The End of the Road being a recognisably realist novel is undermined until it is revealed as being hopelessly riddled by all the above-mentioned problems of attempting to artistically structure reality. The façade of realism is revealed as being exceedingly problematic, and The End of the Road becomes a very different kind of novel.

But, first of all, let us examine that façade, because its creation in this second novel indicates a development in Barth's novelistic abilities. Beneath the exposition of philosophical ideas the novel is very tightly structured in terms of novelistic convention. A few examples will suffice: the actual adultery between Jake and Rennie is presaged in Chapter 4 by a joke about adultery and by Joe's statement that

suppose it were true that because of my psychological make-up, marital fidelity was one of the givens, the subjective equivalent of an absolute, one of the conditions that attach to any string of ethical propositions I might make for myself. Then suppose Rennie committed adultery behind my back. From my point of view the relationship would have lost its *raison d'être*, and I'd probably walk out flat, if I didn't actually shoot her or shoot myself.<sup>17</sup>

The two horses which Jake and Rennie ride in Chapter 15 act as a symbol for two perceptions of Rennie. Tom Brown "was a spirited five-year-old stallion of 15 hands"<sup>13</sup> and Susie is "described as gentle, although she was plenty lively enough for me".<sup>14</sup> Finally, there is the allegorical structure which can be ascribed to the book, in which Joe is Reason, Being, God; Jake is Unreason, Not-Being, Satan; and Rennie is the Human Personality. Battle is joined by the first two for possession of the last in a world of "ontological Manichaeism".<sup>15</sup> Now, I am not arguing that these formal structures are completely decipherable in terms of the philosophical construction of the novel, but that they offer the possibility of decipherment and thus bind the text together more tightly than is true in the case of The Floating Opera. We acknowledge the presence of this multiple structure as we read, and it enhances and increases our perception of the coherence of the text.

Furthermore, the descriptive detail is vast. From a tiny reference to the existence of racial segregation in Philadelphia in 1951 ("I can't go into that lounge over there"<sup>16</sup> says the black Doctor to the white Jake Horner), through absolute precision about dates and times (Jake's first attack of cosmopsis occurs at "seven o'clock in the evening of March 16, 1951"<sup>17</sup>), to the precision of the description of the physical postures of the Doctor and Jake as they sit in the Progress and Advice Room. All this creates the façade of realism, of a multifarious reality with which we come to grips via the conventions of realist narrative and the sense of reality created by the detailed precision of the text. At the same time, this

sense of realism is undercut throughout the text by the overt interposition between the events of the book and the reader of the figure of Jacob Horner as author. The lengthy description of postures mentioned above continues

It seems to me at just this moment (I am writing this at 7:55 in the evening of Tuesday, October 4, 1955, upstairs in the dormitory)<sup>23</sup>

Here we become aware of the contrast between the mass of descriptive detail and the evasive baldness of "upstairs in the dormitory". Or rather, as readers conversant with the realist tradition, our wish for detail is pandered to and, indeed, up to a point satiated - then we are deliberately cast adrift as we become unavoidably aware of the text's status as *text*. Given the later usage of Scriptotherapy, who is to say that the novel is not the product of Jake undergoing Scriptotherapy; that the text is further evidence to prove the dictum that existence precedes essence; that it is the product of Jake's adoption of the mask of author?

Indeed, it is at this early stage in the text that we become conscious of the distinction between the text as self-conscious artefact and the text as a representation of reality. Both of these textual states continue to exist, but with the former constantly undermining the latter. This point is best emphasised if we move forward, briefly, to Letters and quote Barth's final pronouncement on the existence of The End of the Road -

In the evening of October 4, 1955, two years before Sputnik, happy birthday Frederic Remington, as an exercise in Scriptotherapy you began an account of your Immobility, Remobilisation, and Relapse, entitled What I Did Until the Doctor Came. By means that you have not yet Discovered (your manuscript was lost, with certain of the Doctor's files, in the

move from Pennsylvania to New York), this account became the basis for a slight novel called The End of the Road(1958), which ten years later inspired a film, same title, as false to the novel as was the novel to Your Account and Your Account to the actual Horner-Morgan-Morgan triangle as it might have been observed from either other vortex.<sup>24</sup>

A clear extension of this point is Barth's construction of Jake's character, and the concurrent structure of the novel, both of which make any appeal to the world of reality impossible. The confusion surrounding the date of Jake's interview at Wicomico College concludes with the following sentence

Since I would not in a hundred years have been at home enough in Dr. Schott's office to ask Shirley to investigate her files, the question of my appointment date could not be verified by appeal to objective facts,<sup>25</sup>

Thus, we are drawn further and further into Jake's world: forced to accept the text as an account of the events and at the same time realising that the text is a product made by Jacob Horner. The recognition that Jake's use of language interposes itself between the text and the reader, and thereby necessarily distorts that which it is describing, is contained within the text itself. As the Doctor says

In life there are no essentially major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography, and most historiography, are a lie. Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story. Hamlet could be told from the point of view of Polonius and called The Tragedy of Polonius, Lord Chamberlain of Denmark. He didn't think he was a minor character in anything, I daresay. Or suppose you're an usher at a wedding. From the groom's viewpoint he's the major character; the others play supporting parts, even the bride. From your viewpoint, though, the wedding is a minor episode in the very interesting history of your life, and the bride and groom both are minor figures. What you've done is choose to play the part of a minor character: it can be pleasant for you to pretend to be less important than you know you are, as Odysseus does when he disguises as a swineherd. And every member of the congregation at the wedding sees himself as the major character, condescending to witness the spectacle. So

in this sense fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life.<sup>26</sup>

More importantly, we also have Jake's pronouncements on language at our disposal and it is at this point that I wish to discuss the role language itself plays in the creation of the text. Wayne C. Booth's suggestion<sup>27</sup> that all novels have, at the very least, an implied narrator is by now commonplace. But Barth moves beyond this to employ an overtly present structuring consciousness as the narrative voice. Although not by any means the first writer to use this mechanism, he does establish his use of it as one of the characteristics of his works. On two occasions Jake tells us that what we have just read is a compression and an interpretation of the actual events

Now it may well be that Joe made no such long coherent speech as this all at once; it is certainly true that during the course of the evening this was the main thing that got said, and I put it down here in the form of one uninterrupted whiz-bang for convenience's sake, both to illustrate the nature of his preoccupations and to add a stroke or two to my picture of the man himself.<sup>28</sup>

Like Joe's earlier disquisition on values, this history of the Morgans' domestic problems was not delivered to me all in so handy a piece as I've presented it here.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the text The End of the Road is Jake's interpretation and reconstruction of the 'actual events': we have to accept his account, because we have no recourse to any other source. It is crucial to a reading of the novel that we remember that, first, it is Jake's account and, secondly, that it is a linguistic creation - the only existence the events of the novel have is within Jake's use of language.

Before continuing with this latter point it is worthwhile considering briefly the importance of the fact



that this text is only a partial account of the reality it attempts to embody. Within the book itself there is a point at which the partial nature of an account of events becomes extremely important to the narrative, and this is the interrogation by Joe of Jake's motives for having sexual intercourse with Rennie. Joe says

I want to hear your version of the business, if you've got one. I've already heard Rennie's - that's what I've been doing for the last three days. But her memory's not perfect, and like anybody else's it's selective. naturally, what I've heard puts the best possible interpretation on what she did, and the worst possible on what you did. Remember, boy, I wasn't there. Rennie's not playing innocent, but I want all the facts and all the possible interpretations of the facts.<sup>30</sup>

There is an obvious contradiction contained in this speech, between "her memory's not perfect, and like anybody else's it's selective." and "I want all the facts and all the possible interpretations of the facts"; all that he can have is his own selection of the facts and his own selective interpretation. And his selective interpretation is precisely what drives him further and further into a dogmatic assertion of the necessity of absolute rationality. The progression of this assertion can be seen in the shift from his proposition that there are no absolutes to

The most important thing in the world to me - one of my absolutes, I suppose - is the relationship between Rennie and me.<sup>31</sup>

Jake's assault on this absolute, through his adultery with Rennie, and his corresponding assault on Joe's system of rationality, through his assertion that "I don't know why I did it", forces Joe into increasing dogmatism mentioned above and finally to the point at which he says

You claim you didn't have any conscious motives. You weren't aware of any unconscious motives. You won't rationalise. You didn't make any conscious interpretations of anything Rennie did. And you can't remember conversations. Have I got to agree with Rennie that you don't even exist? What else makes a human being accept these things?<sup>32</sup>

To which Jake would reply 'Mythotherapy' and, in the words of the Doctor,

Mythotherapy is based on two assumptions: that human existence precedes essence, if either of the two terms really signifies anything; and that a man is free not only to choose his own essence but to change it at will.<sup>33</sup>

We can assume from his remarks on page 3 of the text that at the moment of writing The End of the Road Jake is undergoing Scriptotherapy. He is adopting the role of author in order to write an account of the events he was engaged with whilst adopting the role of grammar teacher.

Now, if we return to the Doctor's explanation of Mythotherapy, we discover that it is akin to the production of fiction. Jake is writing himself into existence, as both character and author. He is writing, at best, as true a representation as he can of the distortion that he has made of life. And the only tool that he has with which to write his account is language which, as he perceives, is itself problematic as an instrument for the communication of accurate versions of any material. As he demonstrates, by using an overtly Saussurean theory of language,

there's ultimately no reason why the symbol 'horse' shouldn't always refer to grammar book instead of to *Equus caballus*: the significance of words are arbitrary conventions, mostly; historical accidents. But it was agreed before you and had any say in the matter that the word *horse* would refer to *Equus caballus*, and so if we want our sentences to be intelligible to very many people, we have to go along with the convention. We have to say *horse* when we mean *Equus caballus*, and *grammar book* when you mean *this object here on my desk*.<sup>34</sup>

This is all very well as long as Jake remains on the safe ground of description: we accept his words and recognise what they stand for, and thus his descriptions of the Progress and Advice Room, the Morgans' living room, Wicomico, etc., are all intelligible. Furthermore, we accept his designation of roles to other characters, recognising that the role can change but that each is sufficient for a moment. Thus Jake is, in his own words, a sneak, a coward, an adulterer, "an owl, peacock, chameleon, donkey, and popinjay, fugitive from a mediaeval bestiary"<sup>35</sup>, "giant and dwarf, plenum and vacuum". And he can give other characters roles; Peggy Rankin is the "Fourty-Year-Old-Pickup".<sup>36</sup>

But all of this safe ground begins to crumble as soon as Jake is forced to analyse and attempt to understand other human beings in all their complexity, as happens when he tries to identify Rennie's emotional response to himself.

The apparent ambivalence of Rennie's feelings about me, I'm afraid, like the simultaneous contradictory opinions that I often amused myself by maintaining, was only a pseudo-ambivalence whose source was in the language, not on the concepts symbolised by the language. I'm sure, as a matter of fact, that what Rennie felt was actually neither ambivalent nor even complex; it was both single and simple, like all feelings it was also completely particular and individual, and so the trouble only started when she attempted to label it with a common noun such as love or abhorrence. Things can be signified by common nouns if one ignores the differences between them; but it is precisely these differences, when deeply felt, that make the nouns inadequate and lead the layman (but not the connoisseur) to believe that he had a paradox on his hands, an ambivalence, when actually it is merely a matter of x's being part horse and part grammar book, and completely neither. Assigning names to things is like assigning roles to people: it is necessarily a distortion, but it is a necessary distortion if one would get on with the plot, and to the connoisseur it's good clean fun. Rennie loves me, then, and she hated me as well! Let us say she x-ed me, and know better than to smile.<sup>37</sup>

Here, then, language is drawn into becoming a part of the continuum of reality and, just as Jake was not prepared to distinguish between moments in an act, now he is not prepared to distinguish between separate words as descriptive of specific and discrete entities. But, just as Joe Morgan is driven to distraction by Jake's refusal to accept rational distinction, so we, as readers, and Barth, as author, recognise that this is the road to chaos. As Morrell writes

The next step is to use x or y or z for various common nouns - that is, lapse into nonsense - and the step after that is to lapse into silence. For Barth to continue his series about nihilism in this direction he would have had to cease writing. He had demonstrated that words and things did not exist in a one-to-one relationship, that words were a simplification of things, a distortion of them, hence that realism, which is based on the theory that words can transpose the world onto paper, is not a 'truthful' literary technique.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, Jake's perception that language always has the potential to collapse into chaos and his malady of cosmopsis can be related to one another. They are both the inability to choose, and they both lead to silence and immobilisation. And, further, Mythotherapy and the choice of particular words to describe reality are seen as arbitrary but useful methods of release from the problem

Enough now to say that we are all casting directors a great deal of the time, if not always, and he is wise who realises that this role-assigning is at best an arbitrary distortion of the actors' personalities; but he is even wiser who sees in addition that his arbitrariness is probably inevitable, and at any rate is apparently necessary if one would reach the ends he desires.<sup>39</sup>

Both enable remobilisation: mythotherapy acts as a means for preventing Jake from falling into the vacuum of the realisation that there is no essence to humanity, only existence, and that existence - choosing - shapes Jake.

Beyond mythotherapy he is weatherless: language becomes a means of imposing a description upon reality, a set of categories imposed on the continuum of reality to stop it slipping into chaos. This point is re-emphasised later in the text, when Jake repeats the same ideas; that language falsifies reality, but this is the only way in which to get to grips with it. Once this acceptance has been made it is then possible to get on with the job of creating an artistic representation of reality, or at least one's perception of reality.

But then, in a typically Barthian gesture, all of this is undermined with one final sentence. It is worth quoting this passage complete

Articulation! There, by Joe, was my absolute, if I could be said to have one. At any rate, it is the only thing I can think of about which I ever had, with any frequency at all, feelings one usually has for one's absolutes. To turn experience into speech - that is, to classify, to categorise, to conceptualise, to grammarise, to syntactify it - is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work. When my mythoplastic razors were sharply honed, it was unparalleled sport to lay about with them, to have at reality. In other senses, of course, I don't believe this at all.<sup>40</sup>

Thus Barth, in the creation of Jacob Horner and in the writing of The End of the Road, introduces the idea of language as a distortion which is contained in the very nature of language itself, where arbitrary distinctions are imposed upon the undifferentiated continuum of reality. These distinctions, though, are not only arbitrary but also necessary if one is to gain a handle with which to grasp reality. And then this recognition

itself is undermined by Jake's ambiguous statement that "In other senses, of course, I don't believe this at all". As we read we find ourselves constantly aware that the text is always teetering on the brink of collapsing into the chaos of a rejection of the rules of grammar and syntax, of language itself and its arbitrary relation of signifier to signified, only to find itself pulled back from the edge by the understanding that these arbitrary rules are necessary to communication.

Then this whole process begins again. The effect is akin to that of seeing Joe Morgan asserting the power of rationality after Joe and Rennie spy on him locked into his irrational performance. In Freudian terms Joe is repressing his need for irrationality, just as the text is repressing the possibility of its falling into disorder and irrationality. But both, equally well, show the power of the repressed to return to the centre of conscious concerns.

The way beyond this dilemma is, as Jake recognises, that

If you do want intelligibility, then the only way to get 'free' of the rules is to master them so thoroughly that they're second nature to you.<sup>41</sup>

I see this as a motto for the rest of my discussion of the whole of Barth's work. Or, as David Morrell has it,

His alternative to carrying language to the end of the road was to set out in a different direction and on a different road, to imitate not the world directly, but the world as it has already been distorted in the eighteenth-century novel, to embrace distortion and use it as a 'true representation of the distortion we all make of life'. And his next book, The Sot-Weed Factor, he tried just that.<sup>42</sup>

The uses of structuralism  
as a means of analysis  
in John Barth's early fiction



If we now turn to a formal analysis of the two texts, an immediate comparison is possible. I wish to make this comparison in the spirit of Claude Lévi-Strauss's distinction between formalism and structuralism, in which the abstract nature of formal discussion is eliminated by removing the distinction between form and content.

For structuralism, this opposition does not exist. There is not something abstract on one side and something concrete on the other. Form and content are of the same nature, susceptible to the same analysis. Content draws its reality from its structure and what is called form is the structural formation of the local structure forming the content.<sup>1</sup>

The similarities and divergences in the construction of The Floating Opera and The End of the Road demonstrate the co-existence (along with these formal indications) of thematic convergences and separations. Indeed, as I shall argue in detail later, considerations which are apparently only formal become part of the thematic structure of the texts. Not only what is written of, but also the manner in which it is written about, become part of Barth's meanings.

Both novels, then, are constructed around a triad of characters and the interrelations between them. In The Floating Opera Todd, Jane and Harrison have a relationship which functions at two levels. First, there is the total relationship between the three, accurately identified by several critics as a parody of liberal attitudes towards sexual relationships. Secondly, there are the three relationships between the three couples. One of these is despatched as peripheral to the central action of the novel, namely that between Harrison and Jane. Of the other two, that between Todd and Harrison is extremely one-sided



- Harrison can be seen a mere shadow of Todd. His responses to the world are a delayed and occasionally tiresome replication of Todd's, brought about by Todd's influence over Harrison. The final pair of the three, that between Todd and Jane, provides the external impetus for the action of the novel. The overall effect of this is to direct the centre of attention in the novel towards Jane and Todd, with Harrison as very much a minor character. This builds into the design of the novel a clear and obvious irony, that the most 'legitimate' relationship is of the least interest whilst the most 'illegitimate' acts as a focus.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the emphasis in the triad of The End of the Road is equally placed on the three sides of the triangle, but with an emphasis on the sexual conflict between Jake and Joe over Rennie which becomes, enlarges into, the philosophical duel between them. This is the basis of the difference between the two texts: the undeveloped aspect of the ménage à trois in the earlier becomes developed in the later. Of course, one attitude that both works share is the assumption that both Jane and Rennie are no more than the territory upon which the male characters will exercise their philosophical and sexual desires.

If we view the two texts schematically, it could be said that the conflict between Jake and Joe is the externalisation of the internal conflict between the two sides of Todd's character. This is in no way to say that the terms of the conflict are the same, but rather that they have the same functional and structural purposes. It

is as if Barth had recognised the potentialities of the structure he adopted for The Floating Opera and proceeded to explore them further and more deeply in The End of the Road, the second in the projected series . The later novel narrows down the perspective, removes any figure corresponding to Harrison, and makes the two halves of Todd's character problematic by developing them into two opposing figures.<sup>3</sup> The two halves to which I refer are the recognition that "goals and objectives are without value" and the belief that this fact is irrelevant and may be overcome by the adoption of masks (or an endless task such as the Inquiry): halves united in the character of Todd and united grammatically in his sentence "There's no final reason for living (or for suicide)". They are however separated in The End of the Road into the characters and philosophical stances of Jake and Joe. The evidence for this is, I believe, made conclusive by the respective fates of these two. Joe becomes an absence at the end of the novel, "a dead instrument in the dark", whilst Jake survives the events of the novel to become their author as a patient undergoing Scriptotherapy. Their fates are separated, and are separable because they are two characters, whilst Todd continues to exist despite the internal contradictions of his philosophy. Jake and Joe are hunted down by the consequences of their ideas.

Both novels seem to accept the hypothesis that existence precedes essence and then attempt to answer the question, of what does existence consist? At this point the role of masks, and their adoption by Todd and Jake, becomes important. Todd is at pains to demonstrate why he

adopts his three masks of rake, saint, and cynic, and also to explain why each was rejected. In each case, he faces a situation which demonstrates the insufficiency of the adopted mask - the final situation being the most important. Here, Jane's question about his clubbed fingers forces him to face up to the fact of death, a fact against which there is no defence. This is the catalyst which drives him towards the decision to commit suicide. The subsequent decision to change his mind, to adopt an attitude of indifference, is not as unproblematic as the subsequent movements of the text would have one think. The discursive style of The Floating Opera, the demonstration of the statement that Todd has 'opinions about everything', pushes the reader towards some kind of perception of Todd as a more 'rounded' (to use E.M. Forster's terminology) character than the philosophical content of the text strictly allows. The conclusion of the novel permits an existence which provides for the possibility of continuation beyond the bounds of the novel because some undefined essence in the character extends beyond the text towards a humanism of some (undefined) sort. Hence the rhetorical shoulder-shrugging of the concluding sentences

I would take a long careful time, then, to tell Dad the story of The Floating Opera. Perhaps I would expire before ending it; perhaps the task was endless, like all its fellows. No matter. Even if I died before ending my cigar, I had all the time there was.

This clear, I made a note to intercept my note to Jimmy Andrews, stubbed out (after all) my cigar, undressed, went to bed in enormous soothing solitude, and slept fairly well despite the absurd thunderstorm that soon afterwards broke all around.<sup>4</sup>

Jake, on the other hand, is continually insistent that he has no essence beyond his masks, and he holds firm to the construction of a character with no ethical basis that would permit an essence to extend beyond the text. The form, the direct style, of The End of the Road, driving on as it does towards the conclusion of the novel, allows nothing outside of itself to intrude. For Jake, experience consists of the elimination of one mask after another from the range of possibilities, and The End of the Road can be seen as the successful, but temporary, use of scriptotherapy and of the mask of author as a description. At the same time it is a working-out of the elimination of the possibility of a character existing beyond the text. Quite simply, Jake does not exist for us beyond a text of his own making which concludes, significantly, with the word "Terminal". He has even abandoned his car and his bust of Laocöon, and he has become author, nothing more.

One is left, then, with a further question to answer; namely, how is this existence portrayed aesthetically? In The Floating Opera there is a welter of almost desperate realism as a stream of detail is invoked - as we have seen in chapter One. The dichotomy between essence and existence is demonstrated by an almost Sternean recruitment of the details of existence on the one hand and the philosophical assertion of the absence of essence and absolute value on the other. However, the juxtaposition of these two elements, because of the contradictions between them (most obviously the claim of realism that essence resides in the accumulation of the

details of existence), causes the flaws and weaknesses outlined above. The book begins to slip towards becoming a traditional novel, with a central character who has some kind of essence which exists beyond the novel: towards becoming a 'comic epic in prose' which exists in the world of compromising humanity. Throughout, The Floating Opera hovers uneasily between the Scylla of the realist novel and the Charybdis of the philosophical treatise, and never integrates the two forms together in a synthesis.

On the other hand, the paradigmatic (as opposed to syntagmatic) construction of The End of the Road, with its account of the conflict between two philosophies, has allegorical elements which are contained within the text, as Jake indicates thus

Joe was the Reason, or Being (I was using Rennie's cosmos); I was the Unreason, or Not-Being; and the two of us were fighting without quarter for possession of Rennie, like God and Satan for the soul of Man.<sup>5</sup>

The characters function as fixed symbols of a particular pattern of behaviour and the structure of the novel is didactic, by which I mean that it contains nothing that does not relate, almost directly, to its philosophical purpose. But, just as the text attempts to contain the shifting nature of language, so here it takes cognizance of the fact that this allegorical structure "will stand no close examination" and then re-accepts the allegory as useful. Thus, the text stands at a distance from the world we readers normally inhabit. It stands as an enclosed reality which should be viewed as removed from any debate about the realism of the characters. The text itself is

the only basis we have for judging the characters and their actions. 6

At this point, as my discussion of these two texts is moving away from an analysis of what they mean, of their philosophical structure, towards a discussion of how they mean, of their aesthetic structure, the impetus behind this whole thesis begins to emerge. My contentions are, first, that there is a correspondence between Barth's idea that 'reality' is linguistically constructed and apprehended, and the work of structuralist theoreticians and critics. Secondly, that Barth's work is open to a structuralist analysis; that the theoretical frameworks of criticisms based on Saussurean and post-Saussurean linguistics provide a means by which a number of insights into Barth's work will be revealed. And, thirdly and this will emerge towards the end, that structuralist thinking needs augmentation from other theoretical sources if it is to offer anything resembling an account of Barth's work and development.

Thus this chapter itself will divide into two parts. The first dealing with the presence of structuralist ( or at least proto-structuralist) ideas in Barth's first two novels, and the second attempting to apply the work of some structuralists to The Floating Opera and The End of the Road both as individual texts and also as novels in which the use of language follows the broad tenets of realism.

These two strands of criticism are undeniably intertwined because of the proximity of their content - the concentration on language as a social construct and as

a structuring mechanism for a perception of reality - but I believe that it is important to keep them theoretically separate because of the *implications* of the two threads. The former admits a relationship between the text and the critical theory, a broad correspondence in the direction of both, and thus the theory, the criticism, attempts to expropriate the text as an expression and extension of itself. In the latter, the validity of the theory, and its subsequent practical application, depends upon it being capable of taking into account any text. Thus the critical theory and the practice of criticism must be separable from the text in order that the theory and the criticism be able to demonstrate their mutual ability to take account of the text before them. A more general example of this is structuralism's relation to the nouveau roman. For the nouveau roman could be seen as the fictional expression of structuralism, with its apparent lack of relationship to the realist tradition, with which it shares no appreciable common ground (since their underpinning linguistic theories are in conflict). Because, if there is a coincidence between linguistic theory and fictional practice the possibility of a productive critical space is potentially removed. In the same way, the two sides of Barth's relationship to structuralism are the introduction and integration of structuralist ideas into his writing, and the possibilities of a structuralist account of his work that goes beyond the coincidence of ideas in the actual content of The Floating Opera and The End of the Road. Therefore, it may be that to limit our critical frame to

structuralism alone effectively removes the space in which the genuinely critical act exists.

The most immediately obvious example of the influence of structuralist ideas on the early John Barth is the passage in The End of the Road when Jacob Horner is discussing grammar with his students at Wicomico State College, when his pronouncements on the nature of language can be directly attributed to Saussure's Course on General Linguistics. Indeed, they even employ the same example to demonstrate their theories on the nature of the linguistic sign - that of *equus caballus*<sup>7</sup>. And this is not an arbitrary (sic) application of structuralist ideas onto the shape of the novel; but is an integral part of the construction of Jake's character within the text. Because, as he says later in continuation of Saussure's ideas - the natural (sic) progression of which is that any linguistic description of the world is arbitrary<sup>8</sup> -

Articulation! There, by Joe, was my absolute, if I could be said to have one. At any rate, it is the only thing I can think about which I ever had, with any frequency at all, the feelings one usually has for one's absolutes. To turn experience into speech - that is, to classify, to categorise, to conceptualise, to grammarise, to syntactify it - is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work. When my mythoplastic razors were sharply honed it was unparalleled sport to lay about with them, to have at reality.

In other senses, of course, I don't believe this at all.<sup>9</sup>

He has both explained his idea that any articulation of the world of experience is a falsification of that world because of the arbitrary nature of language and, through his last sentence, shows that falsity: we cannot be sure



that the written word is an expression of his meaning precisely because it is expressed through language. This idea, as I shall show later, is more fully worked out in Barth's later novels and theoretical writings. Another, similar, example is Todd's belief in his ability to grasp the meaning of his father's life and suicide through his writing it out in his Inquiry. Through language, Todd believes, he can understand his father and thus himself. The failure of the belief is betrayed by the endless expansion of the project into an ever-greater number of peach baskets and we can continue the idea by saying that only when Todd has encapsulated the whole of reality will he be able to understand his father - but at that point the experiment fails because there are no longer any grounds for distinguishing his writing of his father's life from the totality of reality and thus language loses its basis, its ability to distinguish between phenomena.

It would be foolish to deny that the major philosophical structures of The Floating Opera and The End of the Road are those of nihilism and existentialism. But I will now argue at some length that the nature of the relationship between existentialism and structuralism is not absolute but rather historically and theoretically relative and complex. Indeed, Simon Clarke, in The Foundations of Structuralism, goes to some lengths to indicate both historical and philosophical connections between them. Historically, he argues that both existentialism and structuralism grew from the intellectual crisis of the Third Republic in France:

They shared a common rejection of the doctrines with which they were confronted as philosophy students, and the grounds for the rejection were remarkably similar in each case.<sup>10</sup>

He continues to see the solutions proposed by Lévi-Strauss, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty as "alternative possibilities inscribed in a common, and widely-shared, reaction to an acute intellectual crisis"<sup>11</sup>. This crisis came, in the realm of ideas, as a result of the collapse of Durkheimian sociology and Bergsonian philosophy, and their acceptance of "French classical philosophy's dualistic formulation of the opposition between reason and emotion"<sup>12</sup>. The inter-war response to this collapse, on the part of Lévi-Strauss and Sartre, was to embark on a search for the individual; "the metaphysical appeal to absolutes of morality was rejected in the name of concrete experience"<sup>13</sup>.

Two more points of common origin are obvious; the first being the involvement of a number of existentialists and structuralists (along with leading liberals, catholics, novelists, communists, and surrealists) in the 1933-1939 seminars on Hegel taught by Alexandre Kojève at école Pratique des Hautes études. The list included Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Raymond Queneau, Jean Desanti, Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>14</sup>. Kojève's concentration on the writings of Hegel (particularly The Phenomenology of Mind) as a philosophical anthropology of human consciousness "was an intellectual source for the renewal of marxism, for Sartre's existentialism, and even perhaps for the structuralism of the 1960s"<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, I would want to go one step beyond Mark Poster and suggest Hegel's work as a

negative starting-point for the work of the post-structuralists, as something from which they feel the need to escape before they can embark on their own investigations.

The second point of common origin is the mutual rejection of essentialism. As John Sturrock has written of Roland Barthes

Sartrean existentialism marked him profoundly and traces of it have remained, notably in the extreme distaste which Barthes has expressed over and over again for the philosophy to which existentialism was opposed: that of essentialism. Essentialism holds that within each human individual there is some ultimate essence which does not change and which obliges us to behave, as our lives unfold, within more or less predictable limits ... Existentialism, on the contrary, preaches the total freedom of the individual constantly to change, to escape determination by his part or any final definition by others ... Barthes, like Sartre, pits therefore the fluidity, the anarchy even, of existence against the rigor mortis of essentialism ... Sartre, so far as one can see, allows the human person a certain integrity or unity; but Barthes professes a philosophy of disintegration, whereby the presumed unity of any individual is dissolved into a plurality and we each of us turn out to be many instead of one<sup>16</sup>

Then, as Simon Clarke writes

There is no doubt that between structuralism and existentialism, in particular, there is an unbridgeable gulf, expressed in the by-now standard oppositions of structure to history, object to subject, unconscious to conscious, determinacy to free will, immanence to transcendence ... However, this unbridgeable gulf is not a gulf between two absolutely antithetical philosophies, but in one between philosophies that offer complementary, but divergent, solutions to a common set of problems<sup>17</sup>.

For my present purposes I shall reduce the divergences between structuralism and existentialism to one basic issue: the answers to a common question which begin to steer the two schools of ideas in different directions. This common question is assessing the role of the subject in social thought. It is here, Clarke argues, two different theories begin to emerge as Sartre posits a

Cartesian individual in whom "it is the conscious mind that imposes meaning on experience by integrating experience into a meaningful whole"<sup>19</sup>, whilst Lévi-Strauss begins from a basis in the Freudian conception of the individual, albeit a conception "purged of all irrationalism by the reduction of the unconscious to a purely formal structuring capacity"<sup>20</sup>. Sartre asserts the individual consciousness as the only source of meaning in an absurd universe, whilst Lévi-Strauss adheres to the notion of a deep structure to which the individual, in some fashion, corresponds. Poster sums up the distinction between the two positions, of the assertion or of the decentring of the subject, in this fashion:

Structuralists have indeed brought to light a new level of meaning, but they concluded from this that structure was necessarily opposed to the subject. They shifted attention away from any reconciliation of object and subject toward a programmatic examination of the systematic incongruities between structure and subject, without accepting the need for concrete studies to determine if human beings could self-consciously design structures<sup>20</sup>.

This anti-humanist tendency has been pursued further by Michel Foucault in a series of investigations<sup>21</sup> which proclaim that the human consciousness would be completely displaced from the centre of knowledge.

The structuralists' attack on humanism, and upon Sartre for maintaining his belief in a conception of the cogito derived from Descartes, of the human mind as the absolute verification, had, by 1969, pushed Sartre to the point where he made the two following statements - here in Mark Poster's translation

I am in complete agreement that social facts have their own structure and laws that dominate individuals, but I see in this the reply of worked matter to the agents who works it ...

Structures are created by activity that has no structure, but suffers its results as a structure<sup>22</sup>.

For structuralism, history is an internal product of the system. There are as many histories as structured societies: each society produces its temporality. Progress is the development of order. This historical pluralism subordinates history ... to structural order. The future remains anticipated, but at the interior of well-defined limits, in a positivist sense. In this way, it is viewed as already in the past. It will be understood as anterior future, it will realise for the social agent that it produces and that it conditions, the future being that it is implicitly present in its past. In other words, it is not to be made, but to be predicted. Praxis is here eliminated in favour of process.<sup>23</sup>.

I wish to make two remarks about Mark Poster's scholarship. To my mind he mistranslates a crucial word from Sartre's original. Sartre's sentence begins "L'avenir reste previsible" which Poster translates as "The future remains anticipated". For me, a more satisfactory translation would be "The future remains open to prediction". Moreover, the final sentence quoted is, in the original, not the final sentence of a paragraph. It is the *first* sentence of a paragraph which continues

Mais c'est, comme le dit Engels, l' "homme qui fait l'histoire sur les bases des circonstances anterieures". Non que les systemes n'existent pas, mais c'est l'homme qui les produit, à travers l'objectivation de sa praxis qui s'inscrit dans le monde inorganique comme un sceau<sup>24</sup>.

This is not mere carping on my part. The latter of these 'adjustments' by Poster ignores Sartre's estimation of 'orthodox marxism' as adhering to Engels' conception of dialectical nature, of a correspondence between the structure of human thought and nature as the basis for a scientific socialism. As Callinicos has shown<sup>25</sup>, this conception of marxism led to the determinism against which Sartre (and Lenin<sup>26</sup>) rebelled. The 'mistranslation' has as

its main purpose a downgrading of the role of the active human subject.

By these means Poster is able to posit a combination of Sartrean existentialism and structuralism, a combination in which the two philosophies investigate different, and separate, levels of meaning. Against Poster, I would argue that any juxtaposition of two such differing theories of the subject can only be, at best, short-lived and provisional. Like contending super-powers, they will sooner or later be moved to invade the other's territory or spheres of interest. In those circumstances, peaceful co-existence is not a possibility. The necessary contradictions which emerge from this juxtaposition of opposed views of the subject in social discourse are transcended by a fusion of the initial premises of structuralism and existentialism based on two passages from Karl Marx. They are as follows:

Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow the names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language<sup>27</sup>.

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their

social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or - this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms - with the property relations within the framework of which they had operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out<sup>28</sup>.

With Clarke, I see existentialism as "the ghost that insists on haunting the structuralist enterprise, rudely persisting in pressing the claims of the human subject that structuralism has suppressed, and about whom it would rather remain silent"<sup>29</sup>. Hence, the occasional but striking convergence of thought. Let me offer but one example. Fredric Jameson's (correct) assertion that

Saussure's originality was to have insisted on the fact that language as a total system is complete at every moment, no matter what happens to have been altered in it a moment before. This is to say that the temporal model proposed by Saussure is that of a series of complete systems succeeding each other in time; that language is for him a perpetual present, with all the possibilities of meaning implicit in its every moment<sup>30</sup>.

has a mass of correspondences with Sartre's comments on time in an essay on Faulkner:

Beyond this present time there is nothing, since the future does not exist. The present rises up from sources unknown to us and drives away another present; it is forever beginning anew<sup>31</sup>.

In both, the existence of the present is seen as a total perception with no past and no future; in this structuralism and existentialism are in accord.

But in the previously mentioned passage from Itinerary of a Thought, Sartre is defending history, the

past, as "the human freedom haunting all structures by putting the future of those structures in question"<sup>32</sup>. Paradoxically, perhaps, Sartre seems to maintain an adherence to the synchronous nature of the present whilst at the same time demanding that each movement become a link in the chain of diachronicity<sup>33</sup>. The consistent point in Sartre's writing is the assertion of the individual subject, be it as the structuring compulsion behind discrete events or as the agent of change, and it is the maintenance of this assertion that differentiates the two theories of language.

It is to the divergent theories of language that I can now turn in order to make a number of more specific remarks about their respective roles in The End of the Road. Sartre maintained a theory of language in which language was seen as a "tool for expressing states of consciousness or ideas", but it was a tool which "never translated thoughts into words perfectly"<sup>34</sup>. In Words Sartre documents "his unending struggle to narrow the gap between intention and language"<sup>35</sup>.

In contrast to Sartre language was for Lévi-Strauss not an obstacle to truth but a mechanism that was its own truth. The human mind was manifest, not in its intentional statements, but in the hidden structure, the system of binary oppositions that were present to the speaker in his unconsciousness of them.<sup>36</sup>

It is possible to find examples of both these theories in The End of the Road: the Sartrean at the point at which Jake discusses Rennie's emotions towards him as "x", and the structuralist in the previously-mentioned passage on grammar books. Thus, I want to argue that although the book has a predominantly Sartrean philosophical structure,



as evidenced by Jake and Joe's acts of bad faith in refusing to acknowledge responsibility for their actions and for Rennie's fate, it is possible to posit a synthesis, in the modes used to structure the book, between Sartrean existentialism and structuralism by looking at the respective fates of Jake and Joe.

There is a tension between Jake's constant denial of intentionality (the repeated phrase "I don't know", when questioned about his motives) and the provisional intentionality he displays by producing *this* text for our reading. Jake accepts the pre-existent structure of language, writes within a socially intelligible structure because, as he recognises, to attempt to close the gap between intention and language drives language out of the social arena and reduces it to a private language of nonsense. He accepts the structuralist tenet that "communication of language was inherently social, and (that) any phenomenon that was withdrawn from the social system ... must be doomed"<sup>7</sup>. He recognises the arbitrary nature of language and then accepts that, however impossible it may be to close the gap between intention and language, the latter remains a useful tool to be employed, in his case, to both escape from Wicomico and subsequently to continue his therapy by telling his story in an intelligible fashion.

Joe, on the other hand, resolutely adheres to the concept of intentionality and refuses to accept the existence of structures beyond the control of the individual ego. He is

The sort who heads directly for his destination, implying by his example that paths should be laid where people walk, instead of walking where the paths happen to be laid.<sup>32</sup>

He creates his own system of personal values which become his absolutes and he refuses the validity of all arbitrary systems except his own. And he is driven, first, into the gibbering nonsense of a private language, when Jake and Rennie spy on him through the window of the Morgan house, and finally into silence. It is worth looking at the final telephone call between Jake and Joe in detail. Although it is Joe who initiates the conversation, in his continuing search for Jake's intentions, he is forced, by Jake's statement "I don't know what to do", first to say, simply, "Oh" and then into the silence that signifies that Jake's rejection of intentionality, of any system of beliefs and actions comprehensible to him, has finally driven Joe out of the social world.

A silent irony in the text at its conclusion is that the character for whom abstract ideas really have had a life-or-death consequence, Rennie, is entirely absent by the time of this conversation.

The pragmatic, if contradictory, fusion of structuralism and existentialism, at least in terms of language theory, is Jake Horner's guarantee of survival. But this individual solution to the philosophical problem extends no further than the confines of The End of the Road. Outside of this novel, it is only possible to say that both existentialism and structuralism have as central to their thought the concept of language as a structuring element in perception. Saussure, in his explanation of the diacritical creation of meaning, argued that language is a

form in which there are no positive terms. That is, an object is perceived by being placed within a framework of objects from which the first object is differentiated by negativity. The parallel between this and Heidegger's assertion, that "It is in words that things first come into being and are"<sup>39</sup>, is easy to draw. "Heidegger makes not simply the meaning but the very existence of things emanate from man's verbal expression of them"<sup>40</sup>. There is a difference in emphasis between these two statements but this can be brought into sharper focus by reference to Jameson's remark that

To be sure, when today we say that everything is ultimately historical, or economic, or sexual, or indeed linguistic, we mean thereby not so much that phenomena are made up, in their very bone and blood cells, by such raw material, but rather that they are susceptible to analysis by these respective methods.<sup>41</sup>

For structuralism this is true, whereas for Heidegger's existentialism and Barth's practice as a novelist (more clearly revealed in the later novels but already apparent in The End of the Road), language is the "very bone and blood cells" of phenomena. The direction of the argument is the same in both cases; the difference lies in the distance to which it is carried. Beyond these basic convergences it is possible to map out a theoretical field, an area of study and examination across which existentialism and structuralism have passed, leaving tracks the similarity of which it is impossible to ignore.

I have suggested earlier that Barth's commitment to realism is continually undermined in The Floating Opera and The End of the Road by his concern with language's inability to express accurately the reality of which it

purports to be a description. This problematic is not specific to Barth, but is, rather, part of a wider change in the estimation of realism as an artistic mode. One of the most influential views of realism is that expounded by Erich Auerbach who, in Mimesis, proposes the theory that realism, viewed historically, is a series of formal conduits through which various perceptions of reality pass. Language is seen solely as the agent of change, as an innocent mechanism through which ideas are translated. The critic's task becomes the pursuit of meaning, of the vision of the 'real' which the text symbolises.

Barth's first two novels have a contradictory view of realism contained within them, a contradiction which is, perhaps, best explicated by structuralist literary criticism of the concept of realism. The contradictory nature of Barth's practice as a novelist resides, on the one hand, in his recognition, in accordance with post-Saussurean linguistic theory,

that language is not transparent, not merely the medium in which autonomous individuals transmit messages to each other about an independently constituted world of things. On the contrary, it is language which offers the possibility of constructing a world of individuals and things, and of differentiating between them. The transparency of language is an illusion.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, Barth continues to employ the discourse of expressive realism. By discourse I mean "a domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking)<sup>43</sup> and by expressive realism I mean

the theory that literature reflects the reality of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who expresses it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognise it as true.<sup>44</sup>

This is most clearly reflected in Barth's creation of a narrator who, although allowing the possibility of alternative accounts of the material in his text, structures and controls the text through his own consciousness. The persistent use of the first-person pronoun in both texts is evidence of this ... "In a sense I am Jacob Horner". Whatever the protestations to the contrary, we are trapped within the narrator's account: the texts are the work of Todd and Jake. This latter point may seem self-evident to the point of banality, until we re-emphasise the use of the first-person pronoun. As Terry Eagleton writes

Realism, as (George) Eliot conceives of it, involves the tactful unravelling of interlaced processes, the equable distribution of authorial sympathies, the holding of competing values in precarious equipoise.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, "since every destiny is significant, each is consequently relativised"<sup>46</sup>. For Barth's first two novels, the destiny of the narrator is all-important and all other characters are secondary - as is evidenced by the discarding of Peggy Rankin, and by Todd's decision to destroy himself regardless of the consequent destruction of his two closest friends and their/his daughter. And, beyond the bounds of the narrated content of the text, both of the narratorial *voices* in these two novels intervene between the reader and a posited author.

And herein lies the contradiction at the heart of the discourse employed by Barth in The Floating Opera and The End of the Road. Whilst denying that language is a transparent medium, and thus calling into question one of the central tenets of realism, he continues to structure

his use of language via the first-person narrator, a figure in whom we, as readers, must place a certain degree of trust.

The question which needs to be answered, then, is how - theoretically and practically - a realist process of construction takes place. Coward and Ellis, in Language and Materialism, begin to explain how this happens when they identify the two basic features of realism as being

mimesis, the imitation of reality based on fixing the signifier/signified identity, and the stratification of discourses around this which set up the subject in the place of mastery.<sup>47</sup>

The installation of the narrator as the site of textual truth is simultaneous with the establishment of a procession of discourses which are less than that central discourse. As, again, Coward and Ellis describe the process:

The identity between signifier and signified which is established in realist writing is the precondition of its ability to represent a *vraisemblance*, an accepted natural view of the world. It does not mean that all writing is absolutely transparent, but rather that the narration, the dominant discourse, is able to establish itself as Truth. The narration does not appear to be the voice of the author; its source appears to be a true reality which speaks. The value of the other discourses in the text (the speech of various characters, descriptions of subjective processes, etc.) is measured against this voice of truth ... The other discourses of the text then contain varying degrees of truth or even none at all. Through this position of dominance, based on its equivalence with reality, the narration can then attribute points of origin for subsidiary discourses, appearing itself to have a point of origin in reality.<sup>48</sup>

Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes<sup>49</sup>, Stephen Heath<sup>50</sup> and Julia Kristeva<sup>51</sup>, Coward and Ellis establish, first, the place of a hierarchy of discourses within realist fiction and, secondly, connotation as the means by which the text achieves its sense of the real, of *vraisemblance*.

It is this latter concept that distinguishes structuralist thinking about realism from other critical theories, and I wish to concentrate on it first. Its operation is effected through the action of intertextuality, through the construction of a network of discursive practices within which the text is situated. It is not

the investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived; it casts its net wider to include anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, that make possible the signifying practices of later texts.<sup>52</sup>

These anonymous and lost codes include, of course, grammar, syntax and genre; they are the transmission of general intelligibility as the implicit sum of knowledge which makes it possible to read the text. One of the central codes for the above-mentioned critics would be the myth of the individual as the source of meaning. Their anti-humanism makes it possible for them to recognise the ways in which realist discourse depends upon the humanism of the rising bourgeoisie. This raises a more general point, namely that the revelation of these codes is easier when those codes have fallen into some sort of redundancy. Hence, The End of the Road takes racial segregation and the illegality of abortion as two of its codes to establish its sense of *vraisemblance*. But these are rendered almost comic in their redundancy by their re-appearance in Letters<sup>53</sup> (as Barth himself points early in that novel).

Beyond this general principle are the specific functions of intertextuality at the level of allusion, as it attempts to produce a particular reading by 'prompting' the reader towards certain readings or styles of reading.

These two degrees of intertextuality are united in the theoretical model propounded above by its refusal to see a world of perception not shaped by the intervention of language or linguistic models. There is no disjunction between an anonymous code which establishes the real, and a specific reference to a particular text. That is to say; the distinction between connotation and denotation is fluid.

Within this theoretical and critical framework it is now possible to return to the realism of The Floating Opera and The End of the Road. To begin, then, with The Floating Opera. The self-conscious references to Tristram Shandy in the novel, the author's denigration of his own artistic abilities and his carrying of the precept of realism to its logical conclusion (that reality expands at least as rapidly as the time needed to write about it and thus to write becomes an ever-growing task) - all this creates what is best described as a language of eccentricity. This functions alongside the internal construction of the character of Todd. The references to Tristram Shandy and its eccentricity (both in terms of itself and of its place in the traditions of the novel) create an atmosphere in the text in which the eccentricity of Todd's character becomes permissible. Naturally, for those readers who are unaware of the existence of Tristram Shandy the burden of the creation of Todd's character must rest entirely on the image created by a denotative structure within the text.

More importantly, two other texts play a crucial role in the connotative construction of the philosophical



argument in this novel. These are The Myth of Sisyphus and Hamlet, and the discussions of suicide contained within these texts. Todd begins from exactly the same starting point as Camus in his philosophical meditations, namely that the first question we, as thinking human beings, must answer is whether or not we should commit suicide in the face of a world in which there are no intrinsic values. Indeed, in the opening section of The Myth of Sisyphus Camus's meditations on suicide have a great deal of resonance for any reader familiar with Barth's novel (and, of course, the reverse is also true) - whether or not we should commit suicide in the face of a world in which there are no intrinsic values. Indeed, in the opening section of The Myth of Sisyphus Camus's meditations on suicide have a great deal of resonance for any reader familiar with Barth's novel (and, of course, the reverse is also true) -

Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognised, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering.<sup>54</sup>

This is precisely Todd's recognition at the beginning of The Floating Opera. And again, when we remember Jane's question to Todd about his clubbed fingers, the following lines from Camus reflect the closeness of the two writers' concerns at this point -

There are many cases for a suicide and generally the most obvious ones were not the most powerful ... what sets off the crisis is almost always unverifiable. Newspapers often speak of 'personal sorrows' or of 'incurable illness'. These explanations are plausible. But one would have to know whether a friend of the desperate man had not that very day addressed him differently. He is the guilty one. For that is enough to

precipitate all the rancours and all the boredom still in suspension.<sup>55</sup>

But beyond this common basis, Barth constructs a philosophical argument which is radically different from that of Camus - the attitude of 'why bother?' is very far from Camus's assertion that

I draw from the three absurd consequences which are my revolt, my freedom and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform what was an invitation to death - and I refuse suicide.<sup>56</sup>

Now, one could argue that because the end result is the same, the reasons for the refusal of suicide are irrelevant. But that is to miss the point of this discussion of intertextuality, which suggests the ways in which Barth constructs an argument that begins on common ground with Camus but in its process, its development, diverges significantly.

Any discussion of suicide in literature must include Hamlet. And, indeed, woven into the plot of The Floating Opera are several allusions to this play, the most obvious being Mr. Haecker's attempted suicide, when he is found lying with a copy of Shakespeare's text next to him "opened to Act Three, Scene One, of *Hamlet* with, believe it or not, the words 'not all' noted in the margin opposite the line 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all'".<sup>57</sup> This is the most obvious because it carries direct reference to Hamlet within it, but perhaps a more influential example would be the connections between Hamlet and his father's ghost, and Todd and *his* father's ghost. Both sons feel that his father's death has dispossessed them of the reason for continuing to live. On

the other hand, however, there are the ironies that Todd's father himself committed suicide and that Hamlet ultimately does act whereas Todd does not

Clearly, then, connotation is functioning in two different fashions in this text. The Myth of Sisyphus contributes to the philosophical shape of the text, whilst Hamlet makes a both direct and indirect contribution to the *narrative*. But, by this, I do not intend to install a Chinese wall between the two elements of philosophical content and narration. Camus's text makes a direct contribution to the forward thrust of the text, albeit as a touchstone of difference whilst the references to Hamlet are peripheral to the meaning of the text; they are a different level of connotation, a level at which they are, as it were, a distorted echo - an attempt to tap a culturally received notion of the suicidal impulse, and of its role in Hamlet. Stephen Tanner writes that we should not be surprised when Mr. Haecker has been reading Shakespeare's play before he attempts to kill himself, and he is right. But equally so, we should not be surprised that the actual terms in which Todd discusses suicide are very far from those employed by Hamlet - the references to Hamlet are present in the text not to contribute to the debate on suicide, but rather to produce the conditions in which suicide as a topic in literature is resonant in Barth's text.

Intertextuality cannot indicate a monolithic process without change. Writing involves the constant reformulation and repositioning of the signifying process that is being called up.<sup>56</sup>

In writing The Floating Opera, Barth reformulates and rewrites the debates surrounding suicide The Myth of Sisyphus and Hamlet into the synthesis of 'comic nihilism'; an attitude of 'why bother?'. The threads of connotation in the text become synthesised into the denotation that is Barth's novel. An example of this synthesis is the cynical commentary this novel provides on another passage from Hamlet. When we compare the tone of Barth's book to the following passage from Shakespeare's play, it is possible to see in Todd's cynicism and irony the roots of his version of nihilism - specifically through a comparison of Todd's view of humanity, as here expressed in his attitude to his first sexual encounter;

New to the manners of the business, I cried like a baby, bleated like a goat, roared like a lion. The time came, the lesson, when I was stallion indeed.

And then I looked into the mirror on my dresser, beside us - an unusually large mirror, that gave back our images full-length and life-size - and there we were: Betty June's face buried in the pillow, her scrawny little buttocks thrust skywards; me gangly as a whippet and braying like an ass. I exploded with laughter!<sup>50</sup>;

with these lines from Shakespeare;

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and admirable! In action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!<sup>50</sup>

Barth's novel is here very far from Camus and Shakespeare, but it would be wrong to argue that, for this reason, The Floating Opera is a rejection of these works. Rather, it is the creation of a new discourse which both accepts and rejects precepts from the works I have identified as the most resonant sources. As such, it will carry traces of its predecessors embedded within it. My task at this point

is to demonstrate that the 'perspective of fragments, of voices from other texts' are both denotative and connotative to any reading of The Floating Opera.

In The End of the Road, the same process is at work. Here, the connotative texts are Saussure's Course on General Linguistics and Sartre's writings on existentialism and the construction of the personality. Indeed, the degree to which borrowed terminology and almost straightforward quotation are used - in such passages as Jake's discussion of linguistics with his students - almost moves beyond connotation and into the realm of self-conscious acknowledgement of sources and influences on his work. But this is avoided by Jake's coherent and self-contained characterisation which culminates in the speech quoted at length earlier (beginning "There, by Joe, was my absolute ..."). Here, the denotative qualities of the text contain any extension into direct quotation within the bounds of the text itself, demand that the first allegiance of connotation within the text is to this creation of a fictive, autonomous reality, and prevent the text from being solely parasitic on those works to which it alludes. It is because Jake is a denotatively coherent character in the terms of the book that we are able to recognise that he has an ontological status in Barth's writing that extends beyond being structured into existence by direct allusion and quotation.

Simply put, Jake Horner is a character created by John Barth in his novel The End of the Road. But surrounding that core of originality in the novel, the

elements that make the novel a move beyond being a mere accumulation of the allusive materials it contains, is the whole layer of material which contributes its philosophical and psychological context as a peripheral reinforcement to the creation of Jake as a character. Thus, it is possible to read the novel without any awareness of Sartre and Saussure and the weight of Barth's contribution to the text is sufficient to maintain it as an original and separate work. But equally so, a reading which is aware of the presence of intertextuality must still take cognizance of Barth's contribution to the book. The former reading is capable of acting as the basis for an appreciation and a criticism of the text: the latter reading is more fully capable of locating the text historically and philosophically, but unless it takes account of the former reading (however theoretically and abstractly) it will be a flawed reading - a reading incapable of coming to grips with John Barth as a *novelist*.

I am arguing, therefore, for a critical reading of the text which takes account of both its connotative and denotative qualities. The former of these two is, perhaps, controversial because in both The Floating Opera and The End of the Road the synthetic nature of Barth's use of connotation disguises its actual presence; creates, as it were, the illusion that what we are reading is a transcript of the real, the creation of a reality, albeit one that functions according to the rules of fictive reality. The irrealism of the text, paradoxically, becomes the mask of its realism. This is especially so in those

particular cases where elements which point directly to their existence as artefacts permit the text to function apparently in a denotative fashion - they appear as particular descriptions of a reality which has its own rules, its own logic. But this, in turn, hermetically seals the text off from being 'realistic'.

The only way out of this impasse is to cut through the surface of realism in these texts and to recognise that they are only wholly intelligible when viewed as conscious (indeed, self-conscious) contributions to the theory of narrative; texts which incorporate and build upon past texts and thus act as a commentary upon the process of narration even as they produce their own specific narrative. Thus, as in the case of The Floating Opera, they reformulate (rewrite) Hamlet and The Myth of Sisyphus, and in that re-writing produce new ideas and new philosophical inquiries into the purpose of life and the meaning of suicide. The motif of this is Todd's peach baskets: they contain his description of his father's death, they achieve an autonomy within the text and Todd is condemned to a constant reformulation (rewriting) of his Inquiry. Within the text, the process of reformulation has been incorporated into the structure of the novel. At a theoretical level, at the level of ideas, and at the level of actuality, the text contains the forms of the process of reformulation in its synthesis of The Myth of Sisyphus and Hamlet: and at the practical level, at the level of both Todd's writing of the text and the author's re-writing, the text contains the process of reformulation.

In the words of Coward and Ellis, "the examination of realist texts now takes the form of an interrogation of their structuration rather than their structure"<sup>61</sup>. By this I mean moving beyond a simplistic formalist analysis of the ways in which the novel uses form to activate content, and towards an analysis of the processes at work within the text whereby the text produces meaning. This is only possible by recognising that the basic mechanism by which the realist text (however tenuous this phrase has now become) produces its meaning is an indissoluble synthesis of denotation and connotation, in which the denotation rests upon connotation - "the final effect of connotation in the realist text is to produce the illusion of denotation, the illusion that language is incidental in the process of the transcription of the real"<sup>62</sup>.

One example may help to make this clearer: the texts contain within themselves discussions on the problems of representing reality through language (Todd can't, or so he claims, and Jake is undergoing Scriptotherapy). At the same time, their references to texts of the past which discuss the problems of representing reality through language and literature (Saussure and Tristram Shandy) acts connotatively. The texts denote specific philosophical and fictive realities, but they do so with connotative reinforcement. The form of the realist text itself, with its demand for a representation of reality, ensures that connotation must become part of the process whereby that representation of reality is produced. This is so because

each text is suspended in the network of all others, from which it derives its intelligibility. Realism is 'a copy of a copy', supported by connotation, a 'perspective of citations'. It is



silent quotation, without inverted commas, with no precise source.<sup>63</sup>

Because Coward and Ellis argue that reality is linguistically structured, there is for them effectively no distinction between connotation and denotation. Given this kind of argument, Barth recognised the possibility of employing the literary devices normally thought of as connotative in a process of denotation. It was this which led him into the labyrinths of irrealist fiction. Indeed this step is the recognition of the possibilities of connotation itself as a means of representing reality.

A final distinction for the moment can be made between the realist and irrealist texts of Barth, one which helps us to distinguish between two methods of reading and of writing, both of which may be appropriate according to the status of the text itself. In the realist text the line which marks off conscious connotation from denotation, on the part of both reader and author, is quite clear and limits the extent to which one can meditate on the role of connotation in the text. As I have indicated earlier, the number of conscious connotations in The Floating Opera and The End of the Road seems to be strictly limited and this limitation creates the space in which the problematic outlined above is permitted to operate. The text creates an illusion of a representation of reality by means of this limitation, but it is a representation which founders on, precisely, this limitation. We shall see later how in the irrealist texts this is overcome through a destabilisation of the status of denotation and connotation, and by the recognition that

fiction is a representation of a representation of reality. In these earlier texts Barth seems to be aware of the problems which face him but has not yet elaborated a means by which to escape from the (ultimately self-defeating) terms of his problem. That leap forward comes with The Sot-Weed Factor; with the production of several different forms of connotation within one text, and with the recognition of the process of connotation as a self-sufficient form of denotation.

The Sot-Weed Factor:

the turn towards irrealism

The new course upon which Barth embarked was not clearly defined when he began work on what was to become The Sot-Weed Factor. Indeed, the disparity between his estimation of the time necessary for completion and the actual time needed, might be taken to demonstrate that the scope and implications of the new project on which he began work in 1956 and finished in 1959 expanded before him as he wrote. His intentions in The Sot-Weed Factor were, as he half-jokingly described them, to write " a book large enough so that the title could be printed across the spine, with a plot funnier than that of *Tom Jones*". But there was also a more serious purpose, revealed by his meticulous research into colonial Maryland in general and Ebenezer Cooke in particular. It is this purpose, revealed for the first in Barth's career by The Sot-Weed Factor, that has drawn partisans to defend fiercely and equally fiercely attack Barth as he developed in subsequent years and subsequent novels.

It is a purpose too complex and intricate to be stated baldly, albeit that Barth himself attempted to do so in his essay The Literature of Exhaustion. Rather, it has to be approached via an explication of Barth's text, through a study of the ideas in the above-mentioned essay as they are put into practice. Through a critical study of The Sot-Weed Factor, I hope to show the nature of its radical break with its predecessors.

Thanks to the researches of Lawrence Wroth<sup>22</sup> and Philip Diser<sup>23</sup>, we now know that the central character of the novel is based on an historical figure. But the doubts and lacunae surrounding the historical Ebenezer Cooke

demonstrate much that is common to Barth's use of history throughout the novel. He has taken a framework of fact which he has embellished and developed in order to use it for his own ends - he creates, as it were, an alternative rendering of history, an alternative account which is potentially at least as plausible as the original and the reality.

The intricate, and even labyrinthine, history of colonial Maryland is employed in the same way. At times Barth's account is very close to the truth - or rather it correlates with other accounts! At others it stands alone, stepping off along a path defined only by its own logic.

It is a logic which owes as much to prior literature as it does to history. By this I mean that John Barth employs the formal conventions of other literary genres in a fashion close to that in which he uses history: as a place from which to begin. Most obviously, there is his indebtedness to the archetypal 18th-century novel, with its length, its complex plot and its other characteristics which make such an easily recognisable (and indeed so open to parody, as its practitioners themselves understood<sup>4</sup>) form. Indeed, so easily recognisable that even a not particularly distinguished novelist is capable of producing a fair reproduction: Fanny by Erica Jong<sup>5</sup>. But there are also uses made of Hudibrastic verse, the mock-epic, even Chaucer (compare the tale of Harry Russecks' cuckolding with the "Reeve's Tale"). Barth moves beyond a mere facsimile of these genres. As he wrote

what I meant by 'pastiche' is something that is not just a parody but neither is it a serious attempt at replication or

imitation ... something that was partly a parody but mainly an echo and not an imitation.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there is his employment of the dominant themes of American literature. I realise that to talk of dominant themes may be construed as a vast generalisation and schematic reduction of an enormous amount of literature. It will, therefore, be necessary to formulate a contention that there is a thread running through the literature of America around which a number of themes have accumulated. Beyond this, any further statement becomes, necessarily, tentative. I shall return later to this question of the cohesiveness of a national literature.

It is, then, perhaps more apposite to break this discussion of The Sot-Weed Factor into two main areas of inquiry in order that the monster may be more easily controlled and understood. First, the specifically literary and, second, the relatively historical.

As I have suggested earlier, the amount of labour John Barth lavished on this novel indicates that it commanded considerable importance for him. Indeed, I would propose that his ideas about fiction went through a radical transformation as he wrote this third novel and that the novel changed to accommodate these new ideas. The first of these changes was the change in subject matter. When first started, The Sot-Weed Factor was intended as a continuation of the series of novels about nihilism. But, "he had thought that he invented nihilism, 'and when I found out I hadn't' he said, 'I lost interest.'" And, further, as Evelyn Glaser-Wohrer writes

The novel deals with a nearly inexhaustible number of philosophical, political, historic, artistic, and human

concerns, which are all questioned to a degree where they almost come to invalidate themselves completely because they are only man's constructs. What remains in the end is the artifice and a feeble hope in the efficiency of relative values.<sup>8</sup>

It seems then, that the subject matter has expanded dramatically to almost the entire field of metaphysics. Richard Noland, however, has argued that The Sot-Weed Factor is a continuation of The Floating Opera and The End of the Road in that the "the dominant themes are again existence and identity"<sup>9</sup>. Whilst I would agree with this, I would have to qualify my agreement by saying that the statement is so general as to be virtually meaningless - akin to saying that both a ball and the world are round. Of course this novel shares the themes of existence and identity with its predecessors, but these are so radically transformed in this third novel that the very terms of the debate have been both shifted and expanded beyond recognition.

For Barth

the only essential difference between the first two novels and The Sot-Weed Factor is that he was not interested anymore in writing realistic fiction, "fiction that deals with Characters From Our Own Time, who speak real dialogue".<sup>10</sup>

And here, I believe, we are beginning to penetrate into the heart of the change: that in writing The Sot-Weed Factor Barth abandoned attempting to write realist fiction. As I have argued in my second chapter, the signs of his dissatisfaction are evident in The End of the Road as Jake (as author) recognises that he must aesthetically and linguistically structure his text. But now, the questioning of realism begins to move towards more philosophical grounds. As Jake had said

Articulation! There, by Joe, was my absolute, if I could be said to have one. At any rate, it is the only thing I can think of about which I have ever had, with any frequency at all, the feelings one usually has for one's absolutes. To turn experience into speech - that is, to classify, to categorise, to conceptualise, to grammarise, to syntactify it - is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work. When my mythoplastic razors were sharply honed, it was unparalleled sport to lay about with them, to have at reality.

In other senses, of course, I don't believe this at all.<sup>11</sup>

But in writing The Sot-Weed Factor, Barth deletes the final sentence and accepts completely that the realist fusion of word and object is philosophically unviable. As David Morrell has written (at some length!)

realism was for Barth more than just dramatically uninteresting; it was, he had come to feel, philosophically untenable. 'To turn experience into speech,' he had Jake note, 'that is, to classify, to categorise, to conceptualise, to grammarise, to syntactify it - is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it'. Grammar imposes an order on things that is not there of itself. Abstract words like "good" interpret things rather than describe them. Concrete words like "apple" simplify things that are enormously complex amalgams of other things like "seeds" and "skin" and "juice", and those words simplify things that are themselves enormously complex amalgams of other things. But if the fundamental discrepancy between words and what they refer to makes realism invalid and inaccurate as a means of communicating the truth of things, Barth would not only have to find a different, more 'honest' basis for his fiction; he would also have to stop writing about Reality, in the sense of Life As It Is and Things As They Are, for only by words could he understand Reality. But words distort, hence his understanding would always be imperfect and the sole Reality open to him would be his version of it. 'One ought to know a lot about Reality before one writes realistic novels', he eventually summed up in a interview. 'Since I don't know much about Reality, it will have to be abolished. What the hell, Reality is a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there, and literature never did, for very long'. Once Barth had discounted Reality as a proper subject for his fiction, however, what else was there for him to write about?<sup>12</sup>

This crisis is, perhaps, common to the work of many contemporary American writers. It is a crisis which Tony Tanner<sup>13</sup> has suggested is couched in terms of a choice



between referentiality and reflexivity, between the transmission of a message and the transformation of a language. But it would be a mistake to see this as an 'either/or' choice for, as Jakobson has pointed out in another context<sup>14</sup>, the choice is not between the content of the message and its form to the exclusion of either, but rather a question of emphasis. This is a necessary warning for this whole discussion because it would be all too easy to lose sight of the fact that, even at its most self-reflexive and allusive, Barth's work still contains philosophical contents which exist in intimate relationships with their forms.

Writing with the benefit of hindsight in 1967/8, Barth outlined the direction in which his fiction moved as he wrote The Sot-Weed Factor and, in one crucial passage, indicated the basis of these important changes in his work.

One way to come to terms with the difference between art and life is to define fiction as a kind of true representation of the distortion we all make of life. In other words, it's a representation of a distortion; not a representation of life itself, but a representation of a representation of life. If you acknowledge that premise to begin with, there's no reason in the world why you can't do all sorts of things that otherwise could be objected to on philosophical or other grounds. Like an old-fashioned characterisation, for example. If you acknowledge that you're doing it as an imitation of the way we in fact characterise in life, then you're not pretending to an illegitimate omniscience - you're not pretending that the novel is something it isn't. Art IS artificial, after all.<sup>15</sup>

This, it seems to me, is akin to a manifesto for the writing of The Sot-Weed Factor; it is the philosophical and aesthetic imperative behind the self-reflexive nature of Barth's writing hereafter. Literature becomes, for Barth, "a representation of a representation"<sup>16</sup> and thus,

initially, he must foreground the artifice behind the production of the novel. This is why The Sot-Weed Factor becomes a massive parody of literature itself, why Barth feels that his hands are untied by this recognition.

Let us begin, then, to analyse the uses Barth has made of literature in this novel. First and foremost is of course Ebenezer Cooke's poem *The Sot-Weed Factor*, from which Barth quotes and which provides the basic plot of Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor. This latter statement needs expansion. The plot of John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor is the writing, and then total re-writing, of Ebenezer Cooke's *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Ebenezer sails to America with the intention of becoming a poet. Indeed, he begins to write his *Marylandiad* before his departure. It is, as shown in the text of John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor, a grandiloquent piece written in Hudibrastic couplets. The place of this poem in the text is as an anticipation of Ebenezer's actual experiences. Thus, we have the description of his voyage to America before the actual voyage; his description of his arrival in Maryland before his actual arrival; and there is his description of, and meditations on the origin of, the Indians before his encounter on Bloodsworth Island where he has his revelation about the common origins of humanity. In each case, Ebenezer's vision as expressed in his verse is sorely disappointed by his actual experiences during his voyage and on arriving in Maryland. It is this thwarting of Ebenezer's ideals for the New World which eventually drives him to say, on re-reading the above-mentioned verses:

What price this laureateship! Will I sing these lies, so to write 'Pt & Lt of Maryland' after my name? Gracious folk! Grand dwellings and hostelries! Majestic courts-of-law! Out on't! Here's nothing but scoundrels and perverts, hovels and brothels, corruption and poltroonery! What glory, to be a singer of such a sewer!<sup>17</sup>

He then begins to write The Sot-Weed Factor. The lines quoted from Ebenezer's poem on pages 478-481 are taken directly from Ebenezer Cooke's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and occur at what can easily be seen as the nadir of Ebenezer's progress to Malden (the geographical and psychological place). Hereafter, Ebenezer writes no poetry and slowly regains his place; he earns Malden. But the progress is not yet over. The epilogue, in which Barth undermines completely the 'happy ending' of the novel, contains both Ebenezer's criticism of The Sot-Weed Factor:

The Sot-Weed Factor itself he came to see as an artless work, full of clumsy spleen, obscure allusions, and ponderous or merely foppish levities; and none of his later conceptions struck him as worthy of the pen!<sup>18</sup>

and also Ebenezer's epitaph, written by his own hand:

Here moulds a posing, foppish Actor,  
Author of THE SOT-WEED FACTOR,  
Falsely prais'd. Take heed, who sees this  
Epitaph; look thee to Jesus!  
Labour not for Earthly Glory:  
Fame's a fickle Slut, and whory.  
From this Fancy's chaste Couch drive her:  
He's a Fool who'll strive to swive her!  
E.C., Gent, Pt & Lt of Md.<sup>19</sup>

But even this piece is lost, because:

Regrettably, his heirs saw fit not to immortalise their sire with this delightful inscription, but instead had his headstone graved with the usual piffle. However, either his warning got about or else his complaint that Maryland's air - in any case, Dorchester's - ill supports the delicate muse was accurate, for to the best of the Author's knowledge her marches have spawned no other poet since Ebenezer Cooke, Gentleman, Poet and Laureate of the Province.<sup>20</sup>

The development, as seen by Barth, of Ebenezer Cooke's *The Sot-Weed Factor* to the historical and verifiable version that is regarded as Ebenezer's poem lies parallel to the development of Barth's own The Sot-Weed Factor. Both began as one kind of text and ended as something very different from that original conception. But before embarking on a discussion of the implications of this use of literature itself as a referent for the creation of new literature, it is important to document the three other forms this usage takes in Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor.

The second use of literature is the use of the form of the eighteenth century novel. We have already seen that one of Barth's avowed intentions in writing The Sot-Weed Factor was "to see if I couldn't make up a plot that was funnier than *Tom Jones*". Beyond this half-serious intention there are other, more substantial, reasons for the choice of the eighteenth century novel. The first, unsurprisingly, is that it is the appropriate form for the period in which the action of the novel is set. By the time that Ebenezer Cooke's *The Sot-Weed Factor* was published in London in 1708 very few recognisable novels<sup>12</sup> had appeared and by Ebenezer Cooke's death (c. 1732) Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders, Roxana and Gulliver's Travels had been published, and Pamela(1740), Joseph Andrews(1742), Clarissa(1748), Tom Jones(1748) and Amelia(1751) were to appear in the next twenty years. Secondly, if we examine David Morrell's list of the conventions of the eighteenth century (picaresque) novel -

a hero on a journey with a nit-wit servant for his companion, a search for one's father and one's long-lost beloved, stories told along the road, tests of virtue and manliness, encounters

with bandits, bawds, nobleman, and bullies, unbelievable coincidences, abundant fornication and adultery, possible incest, and more, woven into a plot whose complications seem designed to set the reader's head aspin.<sup>21-</sup>

we can see the attraction for Barth. For a writer intent on escaping what he saw as the enclosing, indeed almost suffocating, demands of contemporary realism - but equally intent on not following Joyce's trajectory out of these constrictions - to write an eighteenth century novel must have seemed a true 'untying of the hands'.

Finally, Barth himself saw the beginning of the novel in the following way

The idea of writing a novel which imitates the form of the Novel or which imitates some other form of document, is not so decadent as it sounds at first blush. In fact, that's where the genre began - with Cervantes pretending that he's Hamlet; Benengeli, Alonzo Quijano pretending that he's Don Quixote; Fielding parodying Richardson, Richardson imitating letters, and so forth. The novel seems to have its origins in documental imitation, really.<sup>22</sup>

In imitating the eighteenth century novel, which itself imitated other literature, Barth is returning himself to the vitality which he saw in that form.

I now wish to lay aside for the time being consideration of the philosophical problems which surround the writing of an eighteenth century novel in the twentieth century and to move on to consider the status of this imitation.

Approximately twenty years after the appearance of The Sot-Weed Factor another eighteenth century novel written in the twentieth century was published, and a brief comparison between the two will lead us a long way towards an understanding of the role of imitation in Barth's novel. Fanny by Erica Jong is a reproduction of

the formal and linguistic conventions of the eighteenth century novel onto which has been crudely superimposed an essentially twentieth century quasi-feminist view of sexuality. As a result, the novel constantly jars as the reader is jolted between the *formal* excellence of its writing and the completely unsynchronous ideas expressed therein.

With Barth's novel the situation is somewhat different. As he writes early in The Sot-Weed Factor, "a clever author may, by the most delicate adjustments, make a ridiculous parody of a beautiful style"<sup>22</sup>. And, furthermore, a clever author is able to create an imitation which simultaneously comes very close to the original and, by the most delicate adjustments, parodies the original. To restate the point: through his use of language Barth makes us as readers aware of the tension he is creating by writing an eighteenth century novel in the twentieth century.

Two elements serve to illustrate this. The first, briefly, is Barth's insistence on historical chronology. Dates are repeatedly emphasised, the exact age of any particular character at any stage in the text is ascertainable and we can create a sub-text of historical setting for ourselves. This is very different from the original eighteenth century novel, which attempts to exist almost beyond time through an abnegation of historical chronology. Thus, we have Barth giving us a 'handle' by which to take hold of the text - an identification with an historical period and thus with a literary genre - and, on the other hand, we are deprived of a tight grasp on this

handle by the author's own insistence on that identification. The second illustration is very similar but it is worth quoting at some considerable length from the text:

Not bothering to trouble his skin with water, he slipped on his best linen drawers, short ones without stirrups, heavily perfumed, and a clean day-shirt of good frieze holland, voluminous and soft, with a narrow neckband, full sleeves caught at the wrist with black satin ribbon, and small, modestly frilled cuffs. Next he pulled on a pair of untrimmed black velvet knee breeches, close in the thighs and full in the seat, and then his knitted white silk hose, which, following the very latest fashion, he left rolled above the knee in order to display the black ribbon garters that held them up. On then with his shoes, a fortnight old, of softest black Spanish leather, square-toed, high-heeled, and buckled, their cupid-bow tongues turned down to flash a fetching red lining. Respectful of both the warmth and the fashion of the day, he left his waistcoat where it hung and donned next a coat of plum-coloured serge lined with silver-grey prunella - the great cuffs turned back to show alternate stripes of plum and silver - collarless, tight-shouldered, and full-skirted, which he left unbuttoned from neck to hem to show off shirt and cravat. This latter was of white muslin, the long pendant ends finished in lace, and Ebenezer tied it loosely, twisted the pendants ropewise, and fetched up the ends to pass through the left top buttonhole of his open coat, Steinkirk fashion. Then came his short-sword in its beribboned scabbard, slung low on his left leg from a well-tooled belt, and after it his long, tight-curved periwig, which he powdered generously and fitted with care on his pate, in its natural state hairless as an egg. Nothing now remained but to top the periwig with his round-crowned, broad-brimmed, feather-edged black beaver, draw on his gauntlet gloves of fawn leather stitched in gold and silver (the cuffs edged in white lace and lined with yellow silk), fetch up his long cane (looped with plum-and-white ribbons like those on his scabbard), and behold the finished product in his looking glass.<sup>24</sup>

Here, we have the exactitude and plethora of detail which enables us to place the content of the text firmly at the beginning of the eighteenth century. But alongside this, that very wealth of detail foregrounds the asynchronous nature of the text simply because an eighteenth century reader would need no vast wealth of detail of this historical and cultural kind since it would be a part of a

shared cultural field for both reader and author. A comparable contemporary example is Ian Fleming's constant employment of trade-names in order to create a recognisable, but clearly separate, cultural field for his most famous creation, James Bond! - whereas a twentieth century author writing an eighteenth century novel for a twentieth century audience must create (or recreate) that cultural field. Thus, the text leads us towards believing that it is an eighteenth century text and, at the same time, forces us to recognise that it is two steps removed from the original experience and one step removed from the twentieth century reader reading an eighteenth century novel. Throughout the structure of the text, Barth constantly emphasises the artificiality of art and uses that artificiality to create a virtuoso performance which, in his own terms, shows the way towards the possibility of a revival of fiction:

Barth, avoiding realism by returning to the origin of the novel, was paradoxically not going backward at all; he was in effect moving beyond realism a large step forward, coming upon new uses for some of those conventions of the novel lately judged obsolete.<sup>25</sup>

This is, again, a debate to which I will return when discussing Barth's essay The Literature of Exhaustion. For the present, I am concerned to indicate the range and purpose of imitative writing in The Sot-Weed Factor.

Barth's parody extends to American literature; it is a parody in which, again, expectations and common assumptions are assailed. It is of two kinds; first, a broad thematic parodying which takes as its subject the notion of American literature as unified around its



treatment of a series of ideas, and, secondly, the parodying of specific works of American literature where these themes are displayed.

To begin, then, with generalisation. During the twentieth century a series of critical works have appeared which have sought to identify what it is that makes American literature 'American'<sup>26</sup>. These attempts have combined this first endeavour with the effort to identify a tradition of work which fulfils their criteria of 'Americanness', and, at their worst, have slipped into a crudely reductionist and schematic judgement of texts by their adherence to this abstract model. Russell Reising has acutely demonstrated the ways in which these works have set out to identify a single feature of the literature which can act as a definitive point of definition.<sup>27</sup> That these single points multiply alongside the proliferation of the works in which they are outlined might indicate that this reductive programme is in vain, but, equally well, these works have acted as a setting out of a critical and theoretical framework within (or against) which we who come after them are compelled to operate. For Barth, writing in the late '50s, the critical paradigm would, presumably, have been constructed around works like Richard Chase's The American Novel and its Tradition<sup>28</sup>, in which the thematic frame of American literature is expressed by a series of oppositions: the Indian as noble or savage, the American wilderness as paradise or hell, liberty versus lawlessness, romance versus realism, the individual versus social construct. A series of themes which are debated in Cooper's

Leatherstocking novels - one of the paradigms of 'American literature'.

The Sot-Weed Factor takes up these debates but there is a crucial difference between the original expositions and Barth's parodic display. In the latter the debates are held explicitly and in a setting which tends to undermine the serious nature of the discussion. Thus, Barth detaches the themes of American literature from his own work and highlights them by setting them in a position where they are not wholly integrated into the text. It is almost as if he is indicating to the reader his capacity to understand the presence of these themes in earlier works and his ability to use them in his own little piece on American literature. This process is now parodic because in the original texts the thematic structure was an integral part of the work, precisely something which could not be detached.

One of the best examples of this double level of parody is the debate on the nature of the Indians. It is couched in almost exactly the same terms as that outlined above, "Does Essential savagery lurk beneath the skin of civilisation, or does essential civilisation lurk beneath the skin of savagery?"<sup>29</sup> but is conducted in a way very different from Cooper. In The Sot-Weed Factor, it is almost a formal debate with speeches for and against whereas in Cooper the terms of the debate are set, to a much greater extent, by the distinction between, in Wayne C. Booth's terminology, "telling and showing". Barth is more than capable of the latter technique when it serves his purpose, but here it does not. For his precise purpose

in foregrounding the theme as debate is to make it explicit (that is, detachable) and thus easily seen as part of an overall parodic strategy.

The second part of the joke is that the whole debate is carried on in the wagon of Mary Mungommery, the Travelling Whore of Dorset, who concludes her contribution to the debate thus:

I wonder again what oft and oft I wonder as I watch the nightly circus in my wagon: is man a salvage at heart, skinned o'er with fragile Manners? Or is salvagery but a faint taint in the natural man's gentility, which erupts now and again like pimples on an angel's arse?<sup>30</sup>

This is just one example of a wider movement, a movement from, to be brief, romance to realism. The characters debate the essential nature of humanity but it is in terms of humanity's performance in the 'nightly circus' of the brothel; Ebenezer writes an epic poem, but its subject is 'poor beshitten Maryland'; the colony is saved from an Indian rebellion, but only because Henry Burlingame discovers John Smith's secret for enlarging his penis. Again and again, the text moves from one pole to the other of a debate which has produced such creative tension in American literature, namely the tension between romance and realism. Barth's account is a carnalisation of some of the themes of that literature.

All of this is, of course and of necessity, sweeping in its generalisation and I now hope to strengthen my argument by turning to the second and specific form of parody. I will use an example of this a comparison with Billy Rumbly's slaying of the bear and the first three sections of William Faulkner's The Bear<sup>31</sup>. In order to

sharpen the focus of this comparison I will make no reference to any contrast between Barth's parody of eighteenth century diction and Faulkner's style. Indeed, even within this limited ambit I wish to concentrate almost solely upon two aspects of these two texts; the situation of the protagonists and the manner in which the bears are slain.

In Faulkner's text the central figure, Ike, is socially located. He stands between, on the one hand, the blacks (as represented by Sam Fathers) and the southern 'white trash' (represented by Boon Hogganbeck) and, on the other hand, the southern aristocracy represented by Major de Spain and McCaslin (and beyond them, Thomas Sutpen and General Compson). This social hierarchy is removed from its surroundings and set down in the wilderness but it is still preserved - Major de Spain rides the one-eyed mule while Sam and Boon run with the dogs.

Ike's development towards adulthood is marked by his increasing individual skill as a woodsman, which eventually enables him to be present at the slaying of Old Ben. But, equally well, his detachment from the world of Sam and Boon, because of his social advancement, means that he is only a witness to the killing. He sees Boon leap onto the bear's back armed only with a knife and thus bring to an end "the yearly pageant-rite of the old bear's furious immortality"<sup>32</sup>.

The oblique thrust of Faulkner's text, then, is towards an interrogation of the quintessentially American myth of the man testing himself against the wilderness. It is an interrogation because, as long ago as Cooper's

novels, there was a recognition within one line of the American novel that the social - as opposed to Adamic - nature of man was primary even in the most isolated circumstances. But equally well, Faulkner's text rests upon the common assumption that

the uniqueness of American fiction lay in its repeated flight from history and society, its myth of Adamic innocence, and its reconstitution of romance within the novel form.<sup>33</sup>

This paradigm of American fiction, acting as it does as an interpretive base from which the novelists work, had become commonplace through the work of R.W.B. Lewis, Richard Chase, and Leslie Fiedler by the time Barth embarked on writing The Sot-Weed Factor and was incorporated both wholeheartedly and ironically into the design of the novel. Russell Reising has demonstrated the ways in which these two interpretations of the American novel contested for critical hegemony in the United States in the Fifties and early Sixties - precisely the time at which Barth was serving his apprenticeship as an American author. Parenthetically, the work of critics such as Myra Jehlen and Michael Rogin<sup>34</sup> in recent years has demonstrated the role of this social nature in works which apparently rebuff that level of determination.

Barth's interrogation of this myth is two-fold. First, because of Billy Rumbly's double social dislocation the question of the relationship between individual endeavour and social location is thoroughly confused - which is surely part of Barth's larger project of obscured identity and its psychological ramifications in The Sot-Weed Factor. It is also part of his, historically located,

acceptance of critiques of social determination which had come to the fore in the Fifties. Secondly, the killing of the bear is, for Billy as for Faulkner's characters, a ritual -

I offered to fetch him a longer pole, and learned 'twas a breach o' his murtherous rules to take help from any wight soever or change weapons once ye've touched the bear - I'll own I felt then, and feel yet, he was hatching these customs as he went along, but fact or figment, he followed 'em like Holy Orders.<sup>35</sup>

But the interrogation of mythic patterning in The Sot-Weed Factor is clearest in the actual manner by which Billy kills the bear. This is no heroic gesture as the bear dies with the spear thrust 'where I need not mention!'. Just as history has been carnalised in the novel, so too is the American myth of self-reliance. As such, it is part of a larger project of parodying the tenets of American literature. Finally, Clive Bush has demonstrated the ways in which the bear has become a quasi-mythological beast in American literature

We have already seen how in Gass's account of the Lewis and Clarke expedition, the bear became a ritual victim to expiate guilt about the possession of land. In American literature from T.B. Thorpe's *The Big Bear of Arkansas*(1841) through William Faulkner's *The Bear*(1941) to Norman Mailer's parody of the phenomenon and the tradition in *Why are we in Vietnam?* (1967) the bear has been the symbol of forbidden (often with sexual connotations) territory.<sup>36</sup>

Turning from specifically literary to relatively historical intertextuality, our second main area of inquiry, it is obvious that Barth broke through the barriers of realism which had, in his view, restricted his writing in the earlier novels. John Stark, in his discussion of the structure of The Sot-Weed Factor, which he likens to a series of Chinese boxes, writes

In The Sot-Weed Factor his way of showing the complex and obscure relations between reality and imagination differs from Borges's and Nabokov's for he mixes the two domains in each box rather than establishing a clear boundary for the whole series, with imagination on one side and reality on the other ... Because an actual poem gives him the bare bones of his story, that poem as well as Barth himself are in the outermost box. Barth, of course, is real and the poem is both real, because it exists in print, and imaginary, because his imagination has created it ... *The Sot-Weed Factor* comes next and is likewise both real and imaginary ... Then follows the most complex box and also the one that contains the infinite possibilities that the literature of exhaustion seeks: the historical and pseudo-historical material of the novel, including the journals of Burlingame and John Smith. These journals are real in that they describe historical people, conditions and events, but they are also imaginary since they do not exist outside the novel and since they contradict the conventional notions about colonial American history ... The main plot line has the same status as the journals, except that its action has not been written down elsewhere, as the journals have been ... The difference between the journals and the rest of the plot is not so great that another layer, containing Smith and Burlingame, must be added, since Smith and Burlingame did not really write these purely fictive journals. Lacking this easy way out - drawing another box - the reader confronts another snag because he must try to decide what is real, a problem that Barth wanted to create ... Barth has thus vastly complicated the old problem of the relative reality of frame and main story. He could make this problem infinitely more complicated and could string this novel out to an infinite length, delaying the death of the novel as Scheherazade delayed her own death by using her inventiveness ... A writer using Barth's method could write an infinitely long novel if he invented an infinite number of journals or an infinite number of actions that he can claim to be historical.<sup>37</sup>

This, it seems to me, is an accurate account of the text itself and of the way in which it merges fiction and reality to a point at which the reader must always be making decisions about the status of particular materials and events within the text, or simply give up trying to make any of these choices. The most obvious example of this is the status of Ebenezer Cooke as an historical and fictional figure. The following material is the product of the research of Diser and Wroth into the life of the historical Ebenezer Cooke.

1661            An Andrew Cooke served on a jury in St. Mary's City, Maryland; received a license to trade in Maryland.

1662, '64, '68. Andrew Cooke mentioned in land records in Kent and Dorchester counties, Maryland. One tract of land he bought, located at the mouth of the Choptank River, called "Malden" and then later "Cooke's Point".

1664            Andrew Cooke applied to the Proprietary of Maryland for 200 acres of land for transporting four people, including a person named Andrew Cooke, from England to America.

Aug. 1, 1665    In England, Andrew Cooke, "merchant and bachelor of the parish of St. Michael, Bassingshawe, London, married Anne Bowyer.

1694            Ebenezer Cooke, a freeman of St. Mary's City, signed a petition against the moving of the capital of Maryland from St. Mary's City to Annapolis.

1708            *The Sot-Weed Factor*, signed "Eben. Cook, Gent" published in London.

Dec. 31, 1711    The will of "Andrew Cooke of the parish of St. Giles-in-the Fields in the County of Middlesex Gentleman" filed.

                  The will, probated on Jan. 2, 1712 in London, bequeathed to Ebenezer and Anna Cooke "Cooke Poynt" and two houses in London.

1717            Ebenezer sold his share of Cooke's Point to Edward Cooke and Anna sold hers to Captain Henry Trippe.

1720, '21, '22    Ebenezer a receiver-general under Henry Lowe, Jr., his successor Bennet Lowe, and others.



1728                   Ebenezer admitted to the practice of law in Prince George's County.

Dec. 1728            An elegy, signed "E. Cooke. Laureate." on the death of Nicholas Lowe published in the Maryland Gazette.

1729                   Ebenezer Cooke a witness in a trial in Provincial Prerogative Court.

1730                   *Sotweed Redivivus*, signed "E.C.Gent.," published in Annapolis.

1731                   *The Maryland Muse*, signed "E.Cooke, Gent.," published in Annapolis.

1732                   An elegy, signed "Ebenezer Cooke, Poet Laureate", "written on the death of William Locke in May, 1732<sup>30</sup>

The sketchy and, in Wroth's account, tentative nature of this material afforded Barth the opportunity to create a character to fill the pages of his novel. Onto this he hung a much larger tapestry in which verifiable facts and, at times outrageous, invention are blended to produce the fictional Ebenezer. As readers, we have here a situation in which we are able to identify two extremes: on the one hand the (apparently) irrefutable evidence that, for example, Ebenezer probated his father's will in 1712 and on page 793 of The Sot-Weed Factor; and on the other, the obvious invention that is Barth's description of Ebenezer on the first two pages of the novel. But between these two is the vast area in which we are constantly forced to make epistemological and ontological judgements about the veracity of the text (in the sense of truth to an extra-textual reality).

It is also, incidentally, a sign of Barth's growing assurance as a novelist that he does not feel the need to overtly tell us that this process is at work, as he did with Jake's musings on the structuring of The End of the Road, but is willing and able to allow this to reside in the overall form of the text. This is best indicated by the integral role another level of parody plays within the actual plot of the novel, and this is the use made of parodies of narrative accounts of the early discovery and exploration of America. The most obvious of these basic texts is John Smith's General History of Virginia.

*The privie Journall of Sir Henry Burlingame and A Secret Historie of the Voiage Up the Bay of Chesapeake From Jamestown in Virginia* are parodic in a number of ways. First, and most obviously, they are facsimilies of the typography and literary style of the original narratives.

At the same time, Barth injects an element of bawdy which acts as an undercutting of the original. This becomes obvious when one examines the constant sexual references in Barth's narratives. The dictum, taken from the body of The Sot-Weed Factor that "More history's made in the bedchamber than in the throne room" is borne out with a vengeance as we learn of the genital and scatological threads which bind together Barth's theory of history as displayed in this novel.

This leads one to a point which lies half-way between the two levels of parody in the novel, these being the parody of historical material and that of American literature. It is possible to see how these two levels are

focused, and have their implications widened by reference to one passage in the book. This is Barth's rewriting of John Smith's account of his release after being captured by Powhatan. Let us start with Smith's account of the events

The Queene of Appamatuck was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, in stead of a Towell to dry them: having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan; then as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his brains, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her arms, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperour was contented he should live.<sup>40</sup>

This is the standard version of the story, and Barth employs it in two ways. First, in the line of his carnalisation of history, Barth makes the reason for Smith's release his possession of an abnormally-sized, and -propertied, penis.

*when now his codd stood readie for the carnall tilt, he rear'd his bulk not an inch below eleven, and well nigh three in diameter - a weapon of the Gods! Add to w<sup>ch</sup>, it was all a fyrie hue, gave off the scent of clove and vanilla, and appear'd as stout as that stone whereon its victim lay ... and as for that same Pocahontas, she did swoone dead away.<sup>41</sup>*

It is yet another example of Barth's revelation of the sexual forces which underly the motions of history in the text and, quite clearly, refers us back to his thesis that 'more history is made in the bedchamber than on the battlefield'. Secondly, Sir Henry's *Privie Journall* is written in a fashion which, in its typography and diction, brilliantly parodies Smith's original. This lends a sense of veracity to Barth's account such that he is capable of making the following remark

*this version (Smith's) made no mention whatever of his scurrilous deflowring of the Princesse, but merelie imply'd, she was overcome by his manlie bearing & comelie face! It was this farce and travestie, ... w<sup>ch</sup> hath mov'd me, in hopes of pacifying my anguish'd conscience, to committ this true accounting to my Journall-booke.<sup>42</sup>*

Once again, we are led to doubt the authority of historical texts and, thus, are moved towards a sense of the relative nature of the truth of any historical account. This is, surely, compounded by Burlingame's claim that his text is the "true accounting" of the events when we know that the whole of the *Privie Journall* is a Barthian invention.

The suppression of this 'true account' is of a different order to that undergone by, for example, John Cleland's Fanny Hill, in which the text has been censored by virtue of its erotic content. Here the author has engaged in self-censorship for the purpose of elevating his own status. And, again, we have a reference to one of the underlying themes of The Sot-Weed Factor - namely, the way in which an individual will present a particular version of a series of events in order to produce a certain interpretation of his/her place in the web of history. The one figure in The Sot-Weed Factor capable of overreaching this process of relativisation is the author, who orchestrates and controls the maze of the plot. This creates a contradiction for reading to which I shall return.

With this creation of (in John Stark's terms) the Chinese box of invented 'historical' material, it is possible for Barth to undermine the notion of a single, definitive account of history. The constantly recurring

motif in the text of the sheet (or sheets) of paper used for one purpose and then for another is clearly symbolic of this. Burlingame's search for the journals has two motives; first, to discover his own past, and, secondly, to find the evidence against John Coode written on the reverse of the journal pages. What Barth seems to be suggesting is that there are a number of equally valid accounts which could be made of colonial Maryland history and the only final limiting factor should be the human imagination. He offers us his fictive account, but couches it in such a way that it is nigh impossible to say 'no, it could not have been this way'. Through his parody of historical material he challenges the notion of a single and final account of the events by offering an alternative and, especially if one has a bawdy turn of mind, plausible account. Suddenly, the fixed points around which other historical accounts have been constructed begin to slide away. John Smith's image as a fearless and upstanding symbol of the Elizabethan and Jacobean adventuring spirit begins to slip towards a figure devious, spiteful and carnal, and, to the twentieth century reader, more plausible. And there can be no real objection to Barth's account because the original image of John Smith was created by Smith himself!

To expand a little further. Barth's account of colonial Maryland, especially the power struggle between John Coode and Lord Baltimore, is labyrinthine almost to the point at which the reader merely abandons him/herself to the text, no longer able to make any real sense of the complexities, and thus enters a relationship of

subservience to the author. As we read, we rely more and more on Barth to act as our guide through the maze, relying on him to deliver us to the final full stop. The allegiances, the identities, even the existence, of so many characters are called into doubt and we, as readers, are left with the sensation similar to that experienced by Ebenezer when he looks up at the stars.

"Forget the word 'sky'", Burlingame said off-handedly, swinging up on his gelding, "'tis a blinder to your eyes. There is no 'dome of heaven' yonder."

Ebenezer blinked twice or thrice: with the aid of these instructions, for the first time in his life he saw the night sky. The stars were no longer points on a black hemisphere that hung like a sheltering roof above his head; the relationship between them he saw now in three dimensions, of which the one most deeply felt was depth. The length and breadth of space between the stars seemed trifling by comparison: what struck him now was that some were nearer, others farther out, and others unimaginably remote. Viewed in this manner, the constellations lost their sense entirely; their spurious character revealed itself, as did the false presupposition of the celestial navigator, and Ebenezer felt bereft of orientation. He could no longer think of up and down: the stars were simply out there, as well below him as above, and the wind appeared to howl not from the Bay but from the firmament itself, from the endless corridors of space.

"Madness!", Henry whispered.

Ebenezer's stomach churned; he swayed in the saddle and covered his eyes. For a swooning moment before he turned away it seemed that he was heels over head on the bottom of the planet, looking down on the stars instead of up, and that only by dint of clutching his legs about the roan mare's girth and holding fast to the saddlebow with both his hands did he keep from dropping headlong into those vasty reaches!<sup>43</sup>

And when we read Barth's account of his reading of the *Archives of Maryland* we find that he has adopted the labyrinths of colonial American history and politics but wishes to reject the original archive's premise for making sense of the compiled material.

"I studied a year or so, very carefully, what they call The Archives of Maryland. This is a series of bound volumes, the records of the colonial Assembly and the Governor's Council from the time the Province was chartered until it became a state in 1776". He learned that the compilers of the Archives were as one in believing Lord Baltimore an extreme good man and John Coode

an extreme villain. He found evidence in the Archives, however, that Baltimore may have been a very oppressive governor and that Coode may have plotted against him for just reasons. Accordingly, when he wrote his novel, he had Cooke accept first one view and then the other of Baltimore and Coode, and finally throw up his hands, unable to decide whether the two even exist or not, so confusing does the matter seem.<sup>44</sup>

Again and again during the text, we find Barth recasting history by throwing into doubt the truth of other people's accounts. His realisation that history can only be known through written accounts, and his further realisation that these accounts are necessarily selective in both their use and interpretation of the raw material of the events, is hardly startling to the philosopher of history or knowledge but it does release the *novelist* to construct an alternative account which is bound so closely into itself that it becomes almost impossible to doubt and thus issues a challenge to history. If words have an arbitrary connection with the objects they describe, then so too historical accounts have an arbitrary relation to the events they describe. This constitutes the next step along the slow road towards a completed postmodernist aesthetic in the work of Barth. The epistemological framework received from criticisms of realism and from Saussurean linguistics has been absorbed and now begins to wield an influence, albeit implicit and contradictory at this stage, on the ontology of the novels.

History, then, becomes for Barth a bare framework of undisputed facts onto which can be woven a variety of accounts. Leaving aside for the moment the problem of agreements on which are the undisputed facts, we can begin to see a convergence with some of the basic premises of Levi-Strauss's version of structuralism. What matters is

not the facts but the relationships between them or, for Barth, between the facts and the layers of submerged material which support them. An example will make this clearer. Barth, Wroth and Diser are all in agreement that Ebenezer Cooke's name appears on the petition against the moving of the capital of Maryland from St. Mary's City to Annapolis in 1694. The difference being that Barth makes the signature a forgery perpetrated by Burlingame in order to confuse John Coode and his allies as to Ebenezer's whereabouts and his real sympathies in the struggle for power in Maryland. A simple, easily verified piece of information is thus thoroughly imbued with ambiguity by Barth's writing.

This is, of course, Barth's point: that through the constant parody of history ambiguity begins to run riot until the reader is massively confused into not knowing what to believe. Tiny details are accurate; the brief mention of the voyage of the *Ark* and the *Dove* refers to a real voyage and reference to a map shows that Barth was at pains to be geographically accurate<sup>45</sup>, and yet Henry Burlingame, arguably the central character in the text, is a fictional creation whose very name is an elaborate joke.<sup>46</sup> Historical figures are impersonated and then have their very existence called into doubt. And at the same time a bizarre concoction of aubergine and spices comes to play a crucial part in the plot. We, as readers, are placed in the same situation as the Swedish navigator;

we are like a Swedish navigator I knew once in Barcelona that had dreamed up a clever way of reckoning longitude by the stars and was uncommon accurate in all respects save one; to his dying day he could not remember whether Antares was in Scorpius and



Arcturus in the Herdsman, or the reverse. The consequence of't was, he reckoned his longitude by Antares with azimuths he'd sighted from Arcturus, and ran his ship into the Goodwin Sands!<sup>47</sup>

As Burlingame says,

your true and constant Burlingame lives only in your fancy, as doth the pointed order of the world. In fact you see a heraclitean flux: whether 'tis we who shift and alter and dissolve; or you whose lens changes colour, field and focus; or both together. The upshot is the same, and you may take it or reject it.<sup>48</sup>

and then concludes that the only way to escape this dilemma is

One must needs make and seize his soul, and then cleave fast to't, or go babbling in the corner; one must choose his gods and devils on the run, quill his own name upon the universe, and declare, 'Tis I, and the world stands such-a-way! One must ASSERT, ASSERT, ASSERT, or go screaming mad. What other course remains?<sup>49</sup>

Barth's assertion is the writing of The Sot-Weed Factor, the structuring of the heraclitean flux into an aesthetic model. The reader's assertion, I would argue, should be an engaged reading of Barth's text. A grappling with the fabric of contradictions until the monster is tamed to one's satisfaction.

It is now possible to ask why, in general terms, these layers of parody are built into the text, to ask what lies behind this formal and thematic range of parody. It seems to me that an extensive answer is necessary to this question, because of the lucid and well-argued case that Earl Rovit made against The Sot-Weed Factor in 1963. His argument asserts that the novelist still faces

the old Aristotelian injunction to make a beginning, a middle, and an end - to start somewhere and conclude with some artifice of finality. The line of movement which the reader traces in the novelist's wake - whether it be serpentine or linear, whether it circles back on itself or climbs far from its point of origin - will indelibly delineate the artist's resolution of form and his statement of value. And no contemporary novelist can evade the moral and aesthetic challenge this problem of form brings with

it ... The novelist has every right - perhaps, indeed, every obligation - to begin with the axiom that "nothing has intrinsic value", but the end of his novel must make a tacit declaration of value, or it will have failed to have achieved an aesthetic form. Hence the popularity of two opposite strategies in contemporary fiction; on the one side is the faith in a superimposed intellectual system with its self-contained logicalities, and, on the other side, the irrational faith in the dark currents of the passional life. The constructed concept and the fragmented dream, the completely conscious abstraction and the dangerous world of the marginal consciousness - these are the two major paths which the artist can choose between, and with rare exceptions, the choice of one will exclude a significant influence from the other. The Sot-Weed Factor is exemplary of the choice for Pope rather than for Poe, for a faith in the limited powers of the human capacity to make abstractions rather than a faith in the irrational urge toward what is unknown and unknowable ... Digressions and stories-within-stories determine the structure of the novel, so that although Cooke's plot-line is reasonably straight, the overall structural impact of the novel reminds one of a pack of hounds with stuffed noses frantically sniffing out a non-existent covey of quail. All this is very comic, of course, and the comedy is rendered even more effective when the reader realises at the end of the novel that no detail has been accidental; each seemingly digressive flight of fancy and each wildly invented anecdote are seen to fit into their proper places. Barth's comic parody turns upon the reader as a conjuror's trick of deception. The entire novel is a joke upon the reader; he was persuaded to show his courage by plunging into a literary swamp and the swamp turned into an elaborately designed swimming pool, replete with interior lighting, automatic drains, and cleverly concealed filter systems.

He then concludes

The novel ends in the last analysis as a shallow parody, an intellectual gymnastic, a mechanical puzzle in which Barthean flex the muscles of his extraordinary dexterity. The reader admires the labour of the craft, enjoys the well-wrought gimcrack, but finds his world unchanged, his experience unenhanced. He has been entertained, to be sure, but he has been cheated of the honest confrontation with the basic questions of his own secret soul that Barth's talents had led him to expect. And he has been doubly cheated, because Barth had perhaps deceived himself while deceiving his reader.<sup>50</sup>

These are serious charges, and it is my intention to challenge them in a number of ways. First, one thing seems to have escaped Earl Rovit's attention and it is a factor so large that it is, indeed, easily overlooked. The Sot-Weed Factor is an eighteenth century novel written in the twentieth century and, *of necessity*, there must be at the

very least an implicit contrast of world views between (in Earl Rovit's words) "the externally structured universe of an Alexander Pope" and "the dream-emergent rhythms of an Edgar Allen Poe". Or, to put it still more clearly, between the rigorously structuring consciousness of the eighteenth century novelists - specifically Fielding<sup>51</sup> - and the twentieth century assertion (of irrationalist philosophy) that "nothing has intrinsic value". Barth's conjunction of these two views of the world is the motor which drives so much of The Sot-Weed Factor. For Earl Rovit to forget this is for him to stand by a thoroughly idealist notion of reading which asserts that the reader comes to each new text as a tabula rasa. Barth, on the other hand, takes constant account of the onward march of both philosophy and literature and creates a text which lies upon the disjunction constantly forced upon the reader by that onward march.

As Morrell writes

the imitation would be no superficial one of Cooke's moral indignation only. It would involve, as near as Barth could recreate, the very cosmic assumptions that Cooke supposedly would have had, living at the turn of the seventeenth century. No Marx, no Freud, no Declaration of Independence. Just(!) Galileo, Newton, Henry More, and such. Aside from the authentic tone Barth would thus give to his book and the fun he would have imagining what it was like to think back then, he would also be implicitly contrasting the world view of the seventeenth century with that of the twentieth century and getting much thematic mileage out of the contrast. (One difference being between the sun as the centre of man's universe and the atom as the centre.

There are other differences too, but what they are exactly does not matter so much as the fact of the difference. People in that age had certain premises which they thought represented the nature of the world, and so do we; their premises turned out to be inadequate and misleading, and so will ours.)<sup>52</sup>

Parenthetically, I can only discover two anachronisms in the whole text and both concern words used before their

first historical appearance (according to the Oxford English Dictionary). They are, significantly, "ontology" - the science of being - and "noumenal" - the real object which lies unknown beyond our perception of phenomena. The presence of these two words is, surely, an arcane philosophical joke, a teasing of the reader's close attention.

Back to the question: does the text have a serious thematic intent underlying the parody, a heart beneath the skins of the onion of formal construction? I do not wish to proclaim, in a paraphrase of Rovit, that the reader does indeed 'find his world changed, his experience enhanced' but, rather, I wish to maintain that The Sot-Weed Factor contains a detailed exposition of ideas with which the reader engages whilst reading the text. Now. it is clear that the only absolute way to reproduce these ideas in a complete fashion is by a word-for-word reproduction of the text, because each artistic production has a concrete specificity which is not reproducible in any form other than that of the text itself. What, then, in this relative world is the purpose of criticism? It is the generation of meaning(s) other than that produced by the author in the writing of the text and therefore the explication of those meanings generated by the dialectic between the text and the reader. The text does not have an inherent meaning which can be extracted, rather, its meanings are surely the product of a process of engagement between reader and text.

Within this model, it is possible to describe circumscriptions imposed on the process by the formal mode

of the text but, as the works of Roland Barthes and Geoffrey Hartman have shown, it is possible to 'read' the construction of even a realist text; a text which apparently denies or systematically conceals the conditions of its production.

The oddity of Rovit's model, which allows only of a choice between Pope and Poe(!), ipso facto disables him from considering the possibility of a thorough synthesis of the two. And it is this synthesis of order and disorder which acts as a thematic core to The Sot-Weed Factor. It is not a fixed and permanently balanced core but is, rather, the balance of a ball atop a pyramid - always on the point of plummeting down one side or the other. The ordered structure of the plot holds in check the chaos of the individual events, whilst the content of the events gives a pattern to the whole novel. Henry Burlingame's vision of the heraclitean flux holds in check Ebenezer's view of the world as ordered, and vice versa.

The argument in favour of the conception of a 'thematic core' is that it indicates a means by which the text can be read, a method rather than an end. To write of an 'extractable core' would be, at some level, to write of *the* core of the novel, of the *correct* reading of the text. But reading is an enactment of a polyvalent text, just as 'form' is an enactment of polyvalent 'content'.

In addition to Rovit's claims, Jac Tharpe has it that, along with all the other literary genres The Sot-Weed Factor pays homage to in its parody, it is also a "Bildungsroman, in that it deals with the education of the main character" and "a philosophical novel in the manner

of Mann, Joyce, and Musil".<sup>53</sup> and he offers a schema for the novel in the following words

Henry is the pragmatic existentialist who literally follows the idea existence precedes essence and claims that therefore a man, in all his freedom, may be whatever he likes, responding to any set of conditions with a bold resolve to be himself, paradoxical as the approach may be. Ebenezer is a platonic absolutist who operates on the idea that essence precedes existence, and his decision to be a poet guides his activity throughout the novel. A great deal of the narrative reveals some nuance of that complex matter, as Eben meanders through the confusion, having chosen the absolutist position, he has set matters up for a bad experience in education.<sup>54</sup>

This offers a means by which the two pairs of opposites - identity and experience, cosmopsis and cosmophily - can be examined as thematic motivations for the plot, as guides to the progress of the characters through the text.

Eben's proclamation,

What am I? What am I? Virgin, sir! Poet, sir! I am a virgin and a poet; less than mortal and more; not a man, but Mankind! I shall regard my innocence as badge of my strength and proof of my calling: let her who's worthy of't take it from me!<sup>55</sup>

follows his rebuffing of Joan Toast, and this self-image acts as a guide for his behaviour for much of the novel. But a tension is created between the ramifications of this statement and the reality of the situations to which Eben must respond. The erosion of Eben's pretensions to being a poet have been outlined earlier, and a similar process is at work with regard to his virginity.

The incident with Joan Toast sets in motion one of the 'great circles' of the plot in which Eben's rejection leads to Joan's flight to Maryland and her subsequent degradation into a syphilitic whore. Ebenezer marries her while drugged with opium but continues to cling to some idealistic notion of women until the final denouement of

the main body of the text. To 'earn Malden' he must consummate his marriage with Joan, of which consummation he says

"'Tis of no importance, Henry. Whate'er she hath, she hath on my account, by reason of our ill-starred love. I little care now for my legacy, save that I must earn it. 'Tis atonement I crave: redemption for my sins against the girl, against my father, against Anna, e'en against you Henry"

"What sins?" protested Anna, coming to his side. "Of all man on the planet, Eben, thou'rt freest from sin! What else drew Joan half round the globe, do you think, through all those horrors, if not that quality in you that hath ruined me for other men and driven e'en Henry to near distraction - ". She blushed, realizing she had spoken too much. "Thou'rt the very spirit of Innocence", she finished quietly.

"That is the crime I stand indicted for", her brother replied: "the crime of innocence, whereof the Knowledge must bear the burthen. There's the true Original Sin our souls are born in: not that Adam learned, but that he had to learn - in short, that he was innocent."<sup>56</sup>

Sexual experience and a wider understanding of the world are, at this point in the text, equated.

But through the novel Eben has a series of sexual and quasi-sexual experiences which leave his virginity, if still technically intact, certainly considerably tattered. On two occasions he is, quite literally, caught with his trousers down, once at the *King O' the Seas* and once by Mary Mungommery. Then there are the events surrounding his night at Tim Mitchell's with the near-rape of Joan Toast (disguised as Susan Warren) by Eben and of Eben himself (by Burlingame disguised as Tim Mitchell). And finally, there is Eben's near-rape of Joan Toast during the general rape and pillage of the *Cyprian* and his complex reaction on hearing that Boabdil contracted venereal disease by his rape of Joan, which concludes

This mystic yearning of the pure to join his ravished sister in impurity: was it not, in fact, self-ravishment, and hence a variety of love?<sup>57</sup>

This last sentence leads us to the relationship between Eben and Anna, and the constantly reiterated theme of incest between the twins. It begins with the ambiguous ring which intertwines their names. Burlingame's constant hints that he has slept with Anna, or that he has not because he desires both the twins together, etc., complicates the matter still further. And his discourse on genealogy, which concludes

'Tis this union Anna desires with all her heart, howe'er her mind disguises it; 'tis this hath brought her halfway round the globe to seek you out, and your father to fetch her home if he can find her. 'Tis this your own heart bends to, will-ye, nill-ye, as a flower to the light, to make you one and whole and nourished as ne'er since birth; or as a needle to the lode, to direct you to the harbor of your destiny! And 'tis this I yearn for too, and naught besides: I am the Suitor of Totality, Embracer of Contradictories, Husband of all Creation, the Cosmic Lover! Henry More and Isaac Newton are my pimps and aides-de-chambre; I have known my great bride part by splendid part, and have made love to her disjecta membra, her sundry brilliant pieces; but I crave the whole - the tenon in the mortise, the jointure of polarities, the seamless universe - whereof you twain are token in coito! I have no parentage to give me place and aim in nature's order: very well - I am outside Her, and shall be her lord and spouse!<sup>58</sup>

makes his opinion and ultimate intention clear. But the relationship is made more complex, for Eben, by the introduction of Joan Toast into the equation;

As he tiptoed down the stairs and out the back door of the house, he saw his sister's drawn and hardening features; as he stalked across the dark yard to the stables he recalled her presentation of the ring, and his answering nervous vow to make her dowry flourish. By the time he found some visitor's saddled horse and mounted, the image of Joan Toast had somehow got blurred with that of Burlingame, on the one hand, and his own cause merged in some way with Anna's on the other, so that the two pairs stood in an opposition no less positive for its being, presently at least, not quite identifiable.<sup>59</sup>

This is reiterated in the author's apology to his readers;

The twins were as close as they had even been at St Giles, with the difference that their bond was inarticulate: those dark, unorthodox aspects of their affection which had so alarmed them in the recent past were ignored as if they had never existed;



indeed, the simple spectator of their current life might well have inferred that the whole thing was but a creation of Burlingame's fancy, but a more sophisticated observer - or cynical, if you will - would raise an eyebrow at the relish with which Ebenezer confessed his earlier doubts of Henry's good will, and the zeal with which he now declared that Burlingame was "more than a friend; more e'en than a brother-in-law-to-be, he is my brother, Anna - aye, and hath been from the first!" And would this same cynic not smile at Anna's timid devotion to the invalid Joan, whom every morning she helped to wash and dress.<sup>60</sup>

Clearly then, in this relationship Barth is hinting at a more complex correlation of knowledge and sexual experience than is so in that simply between Eben and Joan. Indeed, the reference to 'those dark, unorthodox aspects of their affection' and Eben's (and Anna's reported) shying away from such suggestions allows the possibility of a Freudian reading of this aspect of the text.

But this reading is to a great extent circumscribed by Eben's explicit construction of character in which an essence of innocence is asserted in the face of reality. This in turn is circumscribed by the problem of judging individual identity in a world of infinite capacity for deception, a problem which increasingly undermines Eben's belief in the efficacy of absolute values or assertions of essence. The root of the problem is very close to a similar problem faced by Jake Horner, whose reading of Sartre gave him no guidance on whether or not to take sandwiches to work. Eben's version of this is his assertion that being a poet and virgin gives him no help in choosing a book in which to write his poetry. It is the subsequent attack of cosmopsis, "the realisation that possibilities are unlimited"<sup>61</sup> but that equally there is no means for distinguishing between the possibilities,

that constructs Eben's progress in which he asserts an increasingly ill-fitting model of the world and himself until that model disintegrates.

Burlingame, on the other hand, is a personality with no fixed points, a descendant (or predecessor!) of the Doctor in The End of the Road and a precursor of Harold B. Bray in Giles Goat-Boy; a cosmophilist. As Jac Tharpe writes

Henry's theory of cosmophily is a combination of ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics. If cosmopsis is the realisation that possibilities are limited, cosmophily is exploiting the potential in precisely those possibilities. Potential allows for a great deal of illusion and fabrication. In fact, the artist can perform, at least to some extent, precisely in fabrication. If he fabricates to avoid the pit, he is always running from despair and death, of course; but that is perhaps the secret of life anyway.

Cosmophily means that anything goes. And Henry does not create the situation only the name. If God exists as Creator, what exists is what God made. And Henry, instead of disapproving of it, will appreciate it.<sup>62</sup>

or as Burlingame himself says

your true and constant Burlingame lives only in your fancy, as doth the pointed order of the world. In fact you see a heraclitean flux: whether 'tis we who shift and alter and dissolve; or you whose lens changes colour, field and focus; or both together. The upshot is the same, and you may take it or reject it.<sup>63</sup>

He is Henry Burlingame the Third, Peter Sayer, Lord Baltimore, Tom Mitchell, Monsieur Casteene, John Coode, Nicholas Lowe, the brother of Charley Mattasin and Cohunkopets, (and Ebenezer Cooke). He is the man who proclaims that the individual should exploit the flux of life to the fullest extent by entering into that flux; and yet he also claims that "One must assert, assert, assert, or go screaming mad"<sup>64</sup>. Perhaps two passages can best

illustrate the 'fabric of contradictories' that make up Henry. First, his words on freedom:

There is a freedom there that's both a blessing and a curse, for't means both liberty and lawlessness. 'Tis more than just political and religious liberty - they come and go from one year to the next. 'Tis philosophic liberty I speak of, that comes from want of history. It throws one on his own resources, that freedom - makes every man an orphan like myself and can as well demoralise as elevate.<sup>65</sup>

The second is the afore-mentioned passage on Eben's view of the stars as a chaos upon which order is imposed because this comes close to being analogous to Burlingame's philosophy. He is, in Tharpe's words 'the pragmatic existentialist', he imposes a personal order upon a reality he knows to be chaotic, and it is an order he alters at will. But this, he asserts, is the only way to avoid ignorance - by absorbing experience from many different angles. Hence his protean character!

One thing remains constant in Burlingame throughout the novel, and that is his search for his genealogy. Through all the changes of personality and apparent shifts in allegiance, the quest for his past obsesses him. His lack of history, his orphanage from the world of history, is precisely the force which releases his cosmophilic power. However, this freedom is 'both a blessing and a curse' and one senses an increasing desperation in his search for the manuscript of the *Privie Journall* until he discovers his historical identity as Tayac Chimec's son. As he returns to these roots, so he begins to move away from the centre of the novel until he vanishes completely into history, dressed as an Ahatchwhoop warrior.

This figure of the seemingly limitlessly creative and fertile imagination as a form of structuring consciousness is obviously an attractive figure for Barth, returning to it so repeatedly as he does. It is a figure which holds out the possibility of value in a world which previously he saw as having no intrinsic value. Although of course not intrinsic, the value of artistic structure is that it at least gives some sense of *value*. Jake Horner constructed a world which made sense to him through his imposition of an (essentially) aesthetic structure - specifically his assertion that language imposed a necessary medium between actual experience and the report thereof. And now Burlingame, whose manipulation of events seems, at times, to be part of a huge and elaborate game with extremely, even excessively, complex rules, appears as a larger scale version of the same protean figure.

For Barth, this possibility of introducing a value into a world he saw as valueless comes via the possibility of art imposing an order upon disorder. As Glaser-Wohrer writes "In The Sot-Weed Factor, the overreaching motif is the position of the artist and his aesthetic concerns"<sup>66</sup>. This is the reason for the imposition of a rigid aesthetic structure, that of the eighteenth century novel, upon a content that continually gravitates towards a vision of 'the Pit', of chaos. And this arises in conjunction with the rejection of other forms of order, specifically that of history. The notion of history as a series of perceptible causes and effects is constantly parodied and rejected in favour of an alternative notion which relies upon the idea of history as infinitely more complex than

this, upon an idea which continually creates alternative accounts - *A Secret Historie of the Voiage up the Bay of Chesapeake, The Privie Journall, A Briefe Relation of the Voyage into Mary-land* - all of which rely upon the motif of different accounts being recorded upon the recto and verso of the same sheet of paper. Again, there are recurring epigraphs upon the nature of history which undermine the notion of history being anything more than one partial account of the raw material of the actual events.

But if history is rejected as a source of order in favour of an aesthetic structuring, this latter is not to be seen as unproblematic in its potential for imposing a definite form on what Barth sees as the orderlessness of reality. As Glaser-Wohrer writes

Barth is ironical and chooses a hero who is not a poet by vocation but has assumed this role as a result of his inability to achieve anything else. This gives Barth the opportunity to lead his protagonist from an idealistic but wrong conception of the profession to a realistic one, by interspersing comments on the essence of the artist's task.<sup>67</sup>

This is still clearer when we consider Eben's dream of climbing the twin alabaster peaks of Parnassus - he has to ask which is the right one and even on reaching the summit realises that "there's naught to climb here for"<sup>68</sup>. This dream concludes with Eben overwhelmed with cosmic despair and he wakes only at the point at which he is preparing to throw himself off. Glaser-Wohrer writes of this

This moment is the turning point of his life: he is not only cured physically, but also mentally, when recognising that not only the world is absurd and futile, but also his 'values' of poetry and virginity. Not by consciously distorting reality but by trying to grasp it, can one lead a relatively meaningful life. After this perception he feels a strong inspiration and

sits down to write a revised *Marylandiad*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, which differs greatly from the first version.

She then concludes her discussion thus

In his eighteenth-century tour de force which parodies the conventional techniques of fiction writing, Barth confronts his protagonist with the most essential human problems of the fields of philosophy, politics, history and even art. As Ebenezer Cooke envisions these questions from an utterly naive perspective, he responds to them in an innocent manner. This attitude causes him to suffer repeated disappointments about his ideals ... When gradually all his dreams and intellectual concepts are shattered, he accepts the fact that nothing has intrinsic value and that man finds no real comfort in metaphysical beliefs. Thus, after changing his idealistic and optimistic hero into a more or less pessimistic but realistic character, Barth makes him adopt his personally held Tragic View of life.<sup>69</sup>

This is essentially correct except that there is insufficient emphasis placed upon the growing importance, for Barth, of aesthetic ordering. The possibility of imposing an order upon an apparent chaos through art becomes, as we shall see later, of prime importance for Barth.

As Richard Noland writes of the end of the novel

The apparently happy ending is only the prelude to further loss and change. Thus form parodies a universe which at this point in the twentieth century is, to many, inconceivable. The rational, ordered and moral world of the age of reason is now seen as an unsuccessful attempt to create order, value and identity out of the same shifting, uncertain, and meaningless chaos that has tormented writers in the twentieth century. So the present is not measured against the past. rather the past is assimilated to the present. And the perennial themes of American literature - the idea of innocence, the place of the artist in American society, the Indian as evil or noble savage, the wilderness as paradise or anti-paradise, the initiation into society, the problem of identity - are examined against the background of an absurd universe. The result is a comic view of the American experience, but a comic view qualified by an awareness of absurdity in tragi-comedy.<sup>70</sup>

If the text is not to negate itself completely, it must assert something, and that something is the possibility it itself offers of grasping the flux and flow of reality. But in achieving this grasp Barth creates an

hermetically sealed text in which the characters are constantly redeemed by the interconnected (if labyrinthine) nature of the plot. And, as Noland points out, one step beyond this self-contained machine, such as Barth takes in the apology, and the whole edifice begins to collapse in despair, disease, and death.

Giles Goat-Boy:  
irrealism, and myth as a  
source of meaning



It is debatable how seriously one should take Barth's assertion that he had no knowledge of the works of Raglan and Campbell when writing The Sot-Weed Factor. But it is clear that by the time he started on his preliminary work for Giles Goat-Boy the myth of the hero as a narrative structure had become central to his thinking: "he decided that Raglan's 22 stages would be a good general outline for a huge comic novel he had in mind".<sup>1</sup> It is, however, equally clear that he was concerned to avoid a slavish application of Raglan and Campbell's patterns - they were to be a "good skeleton"<sup>2</sup> rather than a template. As he said to David Morrell: "it was necessary to turn my back on knowledge lest it paralyse action".<sup>3</sup> Thus, any attempt to assess Giles Goat-Boy as a mythic narrative must be conducted in two ways. First, through an investigation of its adherence to the model presented by Raglan, Campbell and Propp; that is, as a justification of proto-structuralist conceptions of a universal underlying narrative structure. Secondly, in its existence as a self-contained and original narrative. Barth's method should be seen as one in which myths provide materials for fiction as part of the longer-term project of revitalising 'exhausted' narrative forms, and thus as a way of opening new avenues for fiction beyond the classical realism with which Barth had already demonstrated his dissatisfaction.

The procedure I will adopt, therefore, in the first part of this chapter will be an indication of the allegorical elaboration of the basic structure of the novel. After this, and using this material as a basis, I will go on to argue that, in both form and content, Giles

Goat-Boy is a move (albeit a move problematic in ways I will demonstrate) into the realm of post-modern fiction and is, thus, a development for Barth.

The central thesis of Raglan and Campbell's research is that it is possible to identify a common underlying deep structure beneath the divergent incidents of any single heroic myth. Thus, each myth is capable of being assessed according to its adherence to an established pattern. Vladimir Propp came to a set of similar conclusions in his independent research on folk-tales; he demonstrated the possibility of extracting a common pattern into which all individual folk-tales could be fitted. It is worth noting that a similar procedure was adopted by Lévi-Strauss in his work on myth and culture.<sup>4</sup> All three methodologies are profoundly ahistorical in the sense that they assume that every individual element within the structure has a consistent positive content because it can be enclosed within the overall structure. The meaning of individual factors is subsumed beneath its positional meaning within the structure and as part of the structure. This is, to all intents, a diacritical method. The positive value of an individual element is replaced by a meaning derived from its place within the structure.

This will be both my main formal objection to this method and the source of considerable irony for Barth. For, of necessity, a change in the meaning of an individual element must alter the nature of the structure. (Of course, Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists would approach this point from the opposite direction, insisting that a change in structure is necessary for, and

necessarily produces, a change in the meaning of individual elements.) For example, the removal of the taboos surrounding incest alters the position of the act of incest within a general social structure and also alters the shape of that social structure's pattern of taboos. To deny the need to take the positive of the individual elements into account when analysing a structure of individual elements is to lapse into an empty formalism - the ghost which is always staring structuralist methodology in the face. To reiterate my point with a more pertinent example: changing the status of heroism forces one to view the patterns established by heroic quests in earlier myths (when the status of heroism was unproblematic) with considerable irony.

Laying aside for the moment the fact that all three models differ from each other (and the doubt that this might cast on their common enterprise), we can agree with Scholes when he says that the fundamental purpose of Raglan, Propp, and Campbell was "to show how mythic forms had certain persistent and recurring features".<sup>55</sup> From this basis, proto-structuralists (among whom for the purposes of this discussion I include Raglan and Campbell but not Propp because the latter's work remains at the level of formal analysis) "argued persuasively for the dependence of mythic narratives on certain primitive religious rituals".<sup>56</sup> This, of course, raises the immediate question of the role of these rituals in the formation of human consciousness and allows Campbell to wax at his mythical and vacuous worst. It also, though, allows one to

work towards Barth's purpose in using a version of hero-myths as a basis for his novel.

But first, it is necessary to detail the ways in which Barth adheres to, and deviates from, Raglan and Campbell's models. Campbell Tatham works from the thesis that, although "Barth implies that the movement of Giles Goat-Boy is closely linked to the archetypal patterns brought out by Raglan"<sup>7</sup>, the novel "is far more indebted structurally to Campbell than to Raglan".<sup>8</sup> He begins by detailing the ways in which Barth relied on Raglan for his narrative pattern and then noted that

Raglan also notes other common features of the pattern, and Barth takes care to work them in: e.g., the hero's lameness, his having to work out various riddles as initiation tests, his struggle with a strange figure who may represent the king in disguise, and the close association with human beings in animal form.<sup>9</sup>

But, Tatham argues, although this parallelling is obvious it is not crucial, or even especially significant, to an understanding of the text. Raglan's text operates as a formal structuring device whereas Campbell's theory of the monomyth offers the possibility of irony as a second level of formal organisation. According to Tatham, then, Raglan's work organises the form whilst Campbell's mysticism orders the ironies of the content. I would wish to object to this as a little simplistic, in that I do not find in Raglan the empty formalism that Tatham's argument implies. However, I do wish to accept the idea of heroic myths offering an order for Barth's text at two levels; that of easily identified parallels with Campbell's models, and that of a divergence between the intentions

which motivate the production of heroic myths and Barth's production of an 'heroic myth'.

Tatham then goes on to indicate the points at which Barth diverges from Campbell's notion of the monomyth

In traditional myth, such distinctions (as that between 'hero-saviour' and 'world-annihilating demon') would at least be clear if not predictable. In Barth's inversion, a basically existential premise is inevitably built in: faced with cosmic relativity and contingency, one must (arbitrarily) choose one's role, so that values (demons and saviours) become a matter of point of view.

whereas in the monomyth the 'call' comes typically from without, from some external agent of the gods, Giles' determination to be a hero is entirely self-willed; he calls himself and is thus denied the confidence in the validity of the quest which was granted to prophets and heroes of old.<sup>10</sup>

Giles' progress through various forms of conceptual organisation to the point where he sees the impossibility of any form of conceptual organisation is interpreted by Tatham thus, "Actuality fades into paradox, and the monomyth's basic simplicity is manipulated to reveal ultimate ambiguity".<sup>11</sup> So,

Giles begins his quest with many of the fundamentally naive assumptions which underlie Campbell's pattern: he seeks connection with the 'infrahuman' (hoping that his rather special qualifications as goat-boy will help) and poses various sorts of 'universal doctrine' in his confrontation with the all-generating void. But what he discovers is a void which is not all-generating, but which is Ultimate Paradox. All hope for absolute meaning is shattered ... Because the world is ultimately unfathomable, in the sense of its being made up of interfused polarities, interlocked paradoxes, what the hero has to offer is not a philosophical doctrine but certain aesthetic principles. Giles discovers that there are no answers, but also that this discovery can in itself be a partial answer by forming the subject matter of art.<sup>12</sup>

To recap, Campbell's conception of the heroic quest is based upon some external and verifiable system of conceptualisation which lends meaning and validity through its objectivity. But in Barth's novel this system is

denied and thus the book makes great ironical play through the characters' attempts to order their existences according to an non-existent world view. Beyond this loss of any meaning to the heroic quest

Barth substitutes the use of the monomyth for its fact, employs it against itself, and successfully accomplishes new human work. The boon which Giles and his creator offer to mankind is not doctrine but artifact, the novel itself. Our delight must be in the appreciation of the manipulation of aesthetic ultimacy, not in the discovery of Answers.<sup>13</sup>

To Tatham's argument (to which I am sympathetic if only because it moves beyond a sterile formalism) I would wish to add the following. Barth is attempting to create a narrative which still has mythic significance for the ordering of the contemporary consciousness. To do this he employs two distinctive strategies in the writing of Giles Goat-Boy. Obviously, Barth makes use of the archetypal narratives indicated by Raglan and Campbell. But he also uses a series of allegorical patterns which are overlaid onto this primary formation, a set of patterns that demand that the reader is led to attempt to interpret them even as their production denies this possibility. Much of the rest of this chapter will have as an implicit subtext the question, does this combination of narrative strategies make for complexity or incoherence in the structure of the novel?

Barth makes use of Campbell and Raglan in two specific ways: first, as sources of patterns and, secondly, as sources of content. By a source of pattern I mean the ways in which the hero myth presents itself as a narrative structure. By source of content I mean both the hero as a generality, in which the overcoming of obstacles

is the main device, and the hero myth as a source of specific events within the text.

Raglan's 22 points<sup>14</sup> could be offered as a more or less accurate formal account of the plot of Giles Goat-Boy, with George scoring very highly on a checklist of the prerequisites for herohood. If we then take the points one by one, we can see many of the events reproduced (or at least substituted for) in the novel. The initial difficulty we may have in recognising the overall similarities between Raglan's model and the actual novel are caused by the juggling of narrative chronology and also by the very disparate number of pages allowed by Barth to each point - #11 in Raglan's plan occupying the bulk of Barth's novel. George faces a whole series of tests of various kinds, from physical dexterity to philosophical awareness, and this indicates Barth's secondary intention in using the hero-myths as a basis for this hugely complicated novel. To an audience aware of the parallels, Barth's text becomes an ironic commentary on the simplicity with which the status of hero was once achieved, by showing the difficulties any character aspiring to herohood faces in a world redolent with the philosophical doubts and insecurities of the late twentieth century.

Up to this point I have considered Raglan, Campbell, and Propp as somewhat of a collective offering models to which, in various ways, Barth's text adheres in its narrative shape. But it is now necessary to separate them and consider their underlying intentions. Raglan's text works towards a 'scientific' (that is, free from any

obvious, conscious polemical intention) analysis of the role of the hero and hero-myths in the formation of a religious sensibility. Of course, his exclusion of Jesus Christ from his considerations indicates the kind of religious sensibility to which he is referring but aside from this blindspot (doubtless caused by the prevailing opinion during Raglan's time that Christianity was in some sense a qualitatively different kind of religion and thus beyond this kind of analysis) The Hero is a sober attempt to consider the role of hero-myths in the shaping of human consciousness and their part in answering certain needs.

Campbell, on the other hand, asserts positively the importance of re-discovering mythic consciousness. He, too, indicates the existence of common patterns in hero-myths but he diverges from Raglan in his assertion of our need to accept these mythic patterns as truth. To quote from his preface

It is the purpose of the present book to uncover some of the truths disguised for us under the figures of religion and mythology by bringing together a multitude of not-too-difficult examples and letting the ancient meaning become apparent of itself ... My hope is that a comparative elucidation may contribute to the perhaps not-quite-desperate cause of those forces that are working in the present world fore unification ... As we are told in the Vedas: "Truth is one, the sages speak of it by many names".<sup>15</sup>

In other words, he is proselytizing in the cause of some mystical conception of the need for the rediscovery of a common pattern in the hero-myths as a guide for the living of our lives today. It is this aspect of his intention which allows Campbell to make the following ridiculously thin statement:

Perhaps it will be objected that in bringing out the correspondences I have overlooked the differences between the



various Oriental and Occidental, modern, ancient, and primitive tradition. The same objection might be brought, however, against textbooks.<sup>16</sup>

This is a significant way from Raglan's attempted scientificity - it is a concerted attempt to discover a common pattern for specific ends:

The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul ... It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse.<sup>17</sup>

Propp's methodology is succinctly summarised by Robert Scholes in the following way

From a set of 100 tales of similar configuration he worked on deriving the structure of a master-tale, whose 31 functions include all of the structural possibilities found in the entire set.<sup>18</sup>

And Scholes rightly emphasises Propp's lack of interest (beyond speculation about the interconnectedness of myth, folk-tale and chivalric romance) in the reasons for the similarities he detects between various tales. Propp's concern is primarily formal; that is, his research does not extend to the aesthetic responses induced by any one function but concentrates on demonstrating the existence of a common pattern. This tendency towards formalism is held in check in Propp by his adherence to the inclusion of only narrative functions in his schema. But in the work of Lévi-Strauss non-narrative functions begin to enter the model and the road to a proliferation of arbitrary schemes opens up. This inclusion of a semantic dimension into what is, essentially, a discussion of narrative allows not only the expansion of the study of myth into the study of the common structure of the human mind (as Lévi-Strauss would argue) but rather the expansion of the

myth into a mirror for the inventiveness of the student's own mind. When this tendency is combined with my earlier caveat about the rejection of substantial meaning, Lévi-Strauss's work, at crucial moments, can be seen as collapsing into a meaningless subjectivity. As Eagleton has written of this movement in criticism, "as long as the structure of relations between the units is preserved, it does not matter which items you select."<sup>19</sup> And if it does not matter which items you select, the many aspirations towards the construction of a common master-plan must be abandoned in favour of the proliferation of ever-more inventive personal plans. Although many post-structuralists would doubtless approve of this, I would argue that this is very far from Barth's intention.

Therefore, leaving Lévi-Strauss aside, I want to argue that the works of Raglan, Campbell, and Propp act as a series of bases for Giles Goat-Boy, not only in terms of their actual content but also through their diverse intentions as suggested by myself.

Campbell's presentation of the "modern hero-deed" is obviously something very close to George's heart, but Barth's argument cuts across this. Although George fulfils many of Campbell's prerequisites for hero-hood, it is important, even crucial, to remember that George is a self-appointed hero - "I'm going to be a hero". In contradiction to Campbell's (and Raglan's) heroes, who achieve hero-hood by the overcoming of obstacles, George declares himself to be a hero and then sets out in pursuit of obstacles: "If a man knows he's a hero, can't he always find himself a dragon?".<sup>20</sup> This critical reversal, which

has its repetition in George's assertion that as he is the Grand Tutor everything he does must be Grand Tutorial, means that George is incapable of fulfilling the role of hero as an exemplary figure. In Campbell's and Raglan's models, hero-hood is attained by the successful completion of a series of tasks in a particular way. Because George declares that he is the Grand Tutor before attempting his tasks, we have no way of knowing whether he has fulfilled them correctly. And neither do the populace of the University, who follow George's teachings into confusion and destruction.

Furthermore, because we have only George's account of the events, we have no way of assessing the status of any of the characters as participants in the myth. The text is awash with indeterminacy. To adjust Campbell's quotation from the Vedas - the sages speak of truth by many names, and there are as many truths as there are sages<sup>21</sup>. This projects an ironic argument against Campbell by rejecting the possibility of the discovery of any exemplary or positive mode for examining the aspirant hero's actions. Campbell's meaningful past and meaningless present have been collapsed together by Barth into a confusion of which Giles Goat-Boy is the enactment. This is, of course, a variant on Barth's earlier statements about the absence or impossibility of intrinsic or absolute values.

Beyond this, it is possible to read Giles Goat-Boy in two ways - as ritual and as allegory - and I want to argue that the tension between these two strains the novel. As Scholes has indicated, neither Raglan nor Propp

are concerned to discover the meaning behind the similarities they detect in myths and folk-tales:

Raglan's point is to suggest a basis in ritual for all these similarities, but with or without ritual the similarities suggest the existence of some fundamental grammar of narrative over a wide range of humanity. Neither Raglan nor Propp is concerned for the reasons for this.<sup>22</sup>

Their point is to indicate the existence of continuous elements and their concern is not with a discussion of the specific meaning or purpose of each individual element.

This approach can be adopted when reading Giles Goat-Boy, and the novel can be seen as a performance of the pattern that makes up the ritual. With this reading, one's attention focuses not on interpreting the meaning of Giles' Assignment, his journeys through WESCAC, or the Shafting. It focuses upon noting the presence of these events as one checks them off against a list of prerequisites for the book's admission to the company of myths. The opacity of certain sections of the book certainly lends itself to this reading. This coincides with the work of the mythographers, where discussion of the substantial meaning of particular elements of the myth or ritual is absent.

But at the same time, it is possible to read the book as an allegory, in the technical sense. That is, it is possible to identify a relationship between the events of the novel and historical events. It is to an investigation of this difficult and many-layered relationship to which I wish now to turn, in an attempt to indicate some kind of substantial meaning in the text. Robert Scholes, in

Fabulation and Metafiction, indicates two basic ways in which allegory functions in Giles Goat-Boy:

1) a simple sort of allusion to a specific person or event under another name.

and

2) a more complicated sort of allegorical allusion, through which a character or event acquires a discernible reference to a corresponding person or event in actuality without becoming entirely governed by or explainable in terms of that actuality.<sup>23</sup>

The first kind of allegory is more easily identifiable, as Glaser-Wohrer and Morrell have shown:

Politically, the world of Giles Goat-Boy consists of two university campuses, East and West, inhabited by Student Unionists (Communists) and Informationalists (Capitalists). The two campuses have been in a cruel war, the Second Campus Riot, against Siegfrieder College (Germany), during which hundreds of Moishians (Jews) had been killed by the Bonifascists (Nazis). The war had ended when someone in New Tammany College (USA) pushed a button on WESCAC (West Campus Automatic Computer) and thereby caused a terrible disaster in Ameratsu College (Japan). East and West Campus are now in a Quiet Riot (Cold War) which is always endangered to turn into CR III if one of the colleges should try out its EAT (Electroencephalic Amplification and Transmission) project (atom bomb) on other campuses. The action of the novel takes place in New Tammany College which is ruled by a Chancellor (President) and by WESCAC, the great computer that can program itself automatically.<sup>24</sup>

East Campus and West Campus are pretty obviously Russia and the United States. Siegfrieder College is Germany. The Bonifascists are the Nazis, and the Student-Unionists are the Communists. Campus Riots One and Two are the World Wars. The computer WESCAC with its devastating EAT rays is the atomic bomb. All that is easy to identify. But what about the novel's characters? Are there real-life counterparts to them as well? A search in that direction is fascinating. Thinly disguised are Dwight and Milton Eisenhower, Krushev and his son-in-law, the Kennedys (Joe, John, Robert and Jacqueline), J. Edgar Hoover, Bernard Baruch, Oppenheimer and Einstein, Joe McCarthy, Leslie Fiedler, the Dalai Lama, and lord knows who else.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed the individual reader finds resonances which it is possible to pursue. An example; if Lucius Rexford can be connected to John F. Kennedy, then surely the Lighthouse lights being left on during the crises at New Tammany College are a reference to Schlesinger's report in his

memoirs that during the Cuban missile crisis Kennedy kept the lights of the White House burning all night whilst he wandered rooms and corridors? The identification game can be played to the slightest or deepest level, once the reader has grasped the broad outlines of the patterns; historical, religious, philosophical, mythical, etc.. Of course, one is on dangerous ground here because, as Tolkien wrote of allegory,

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and have always done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true and feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the proposed domination of the author.<sup>26</sup>

The line between 'applicability' and 'allegory' is never clear or even stable in Giles Goat-Boy. This is, I believe, intentional for two reasons. First, because in writing a 'sacred book' he wishes his reader to take the text to heart in the same way as biblical exegesis, i.e., as the basis of many and different interpretations. And secondly, because the novel is a prime example of fabulation - of which Scholes's characterisation is that it is "a tricky business for both reader and writer - a matter of delicate control on the one hand and intelligent inference on the other".<sup>27</sup> Barth's demand for a high level of commitment brings a number of consequent difficulties, most obviously over-reading - the point at which the 'freedom of the reader' comes into contact with 'the purposed domination of the author'. I suspect that Barth's position is somewhere between the two extreme positions examined by Barthes in *The Death of the Author*.

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.<sup>28</sup>

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: a book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedents to his work as a father to his child.<sup>29</sup>

Barthes proposes the reader as the repository of meaning rather than the author, in opposition to the usual explanation of the generation of meaning. Clearly, neither of these positions would be held whole-heartedly by Barth. Despite the prolix avoidances of the Disclaimer and the Cover-Letter to the Editors, Barth accepts the position of author of his text. But, equally so, he demands the reader's attention and work as interpreter on a much more active level. The hierarchy remains the same, if telescoped, but the stakes are much higher than in realist fiction.

One is also on dangerous ground when talking of the broad outlines of the allegorical patterns because this implies a common level of stability in all the allegories. This, I believe, is a mistaken view. Scholes writes:

To understand the vision of this book, the reader must come to terms with its allegory. He must learn its workings - its facets and their relations.<sup>30</sup>

But I would argue that the allegories have different levels of stability, and thus Scholes's effort to meld them into a single integrated whole is misplaced.

Let us examine two extremes: on the one hand one has the religious allegory, of which Scholes writes

By making his 'hero' a 'goat' (an expression which in our idiom is paradoxical) he has chosen to upset the traditional Christian

view of salvation. In tradition Christ, the Lamb of God, drove the pagan gods out of Europe and stilled forever the voice of the goatish Pan. Barth's *Revised New Syllabus* comically but seriously reinstates the goatish side of man. George is, as Stoker jokingly remarks, "Enos Enoch with balls" - a saviour who will restore sexuality to an honoured place in human existence. In this respect Barth joins Yeats, Lawrence, Swinburne, and other artists who have rebelled against the "Pale Galilean". There should be nothing shocking in this. In a post-Freudian world, even the traditional celibacy of the Roman Catholic priesthood is being seriously challenged from within the Church. Barth's *Revised New Syllabus* simply reflects this new attitude.<sup>31</sup>

This is a stable allegory, in that the rebellion against the "Pale Galilean" is maintained throughout the novel. On the other hand, one has the historical/political allegory. Here, the basic pattern laid down by Barth is recognisably the version of World War Two and the Cold War put forward by bourgeois historians and politicians up to 1962 (and more recently revived by the Reagan and Thatcher administrations): that is, the world was, at the end of Campus Riot II divided into two opposed camps ( New Tammany College and Nikolay) between whom there is an irreconcilable conflict. But the writing of Giles Goat-Boy straddled the end of the first cold war (1945-1962) and the beginnings of detente (through the late '60s): from NSC 68's declaration that "the cold war is in fact a real war in which the survival of the free world is at stake"<sup>32</sup> to the "slowly developing trade and financial links between Russia and the West"<sup>33</sup>. Barth in writing Giles Goat-Boy, takes account of this shift. On the one hand, one has the history of the university as presented to Giles<sup>34</sup>, and on the other hand one has his experiences in the Power House.<sup>35</sup> The allegory oscillates between the bourgeois account of the origins and nature of the cold war, and an account close to the analysis of post-Second



World War history offered by Cliff, Harman and Binns<sup>36</sup>. The upshot of this is firstly that, although one can identify allusions to individuals and events, the status of these individuals and events within the allegory is unsure. Secondly, within the allegorical scheme, Barth includes figures who are not strictly allegorical but rather archetypal - Maurice Stoker, Pete Greene, Leonid Alexandrov - in the sense that they have no clearly identifiable relation to the historical events to which the text most probably refers.

The combination of these factors has a number of effects. First, one cannot pursue the allegory any further than the identification of characters and events with their corresponding points in historical reality. Thus, at this level, the allegory collapses into an imperfectly functioning *roman à clef* which does not have the resonances of allegory. Second, the confusion within the underlying theoretical scheme for the historical/political allegory calls into being archetypal figures who intervene in the text in terms of pure story because their allegorical status is so unsure, and who construct a philosophical/political position which is essentially 'a plague on both your houses'.

This, it seems to me, is indicative of several things. First, Barth's disinterest (before the 1980's) in contemporary politics,

Muse spare me (at the desk I mean) from Social-Historical Responsibility, and in the last analysis from every kind as well, except Artistic. Your teller of stories will likely be responsive to his time; he needn't be responsible for it.<sup>37</sup>

This has its roots in Barth's use of the "madness of contemporary society" as a basis for the telling of stories and for no other purpose: therefore, one should not attempt to discover any political commitment in Giles Goat-Boy which extends further than an exposition of the madness from a liberal point of view. (By liberal I mean the ability to see this madness but a lack of will to attempt to change the course of this madness).

Therefore, one can arrange Giles Goat-Boy on a number of levels, remembering of course that these levels constantly interpenetrate one another. As Scholes writes:

the critic must huff and puff along in an attempt to deal separately and statically with materials that function as a complex dynamic process in the work.<sup>38</sup>

But this is a necessary process, because it is only by beginning at a height of abstraction that one can work towards an evermore complete appreciation of the complex and dynamic whole. Thus, one can start by saying that the novel begins with the unifying process of myth - "the human truth embodied in myths is reinvigorated by the new combinations of them assembled in this chronicle of heroic action"<sup>39</sup>. This new performance of heroic myths is set against a background of allegorical patterns - religious, political, sociological - and the archetypal moments of the myth are enacted against a more or less complex amalgam of threads from these patterns. This combination of myth and allegory is further complicated by the introduction of elements of pure story, i.e., elements in the text which escape reduction to allegory, such as the details of Pete Greene's history. All of this is encircled

and penetrated by uncertainty: uncertainty about the status of heroes, the weight one should give to any single allegorical thread, the position of elements within any particular allegory, the meaning of words, even the ontology of the novel itself. Finally, the movement of the whole novel points towards a philosophy in which "every man is unique, alone, poised over chaos"<sup>40</sup>. Thus, Giles Goat-Boy is a contribution to myth in that it "tells us that we are all part of a great story"<sup>41</sup>, it tells us that "ontogeny recapitulates cosmogeny" but at the same time it tells us that cosmogeny is nothing more than the accumulation of ontogenies. The whole is the approximate summation of its parts, but every part is irreducibly different from this projected whole. Thus, George's story is the re-enactment of heroic myths but it is not the repetition of the myth of any hero. Thus, also, the allegories are re-enactments of an external reality but they are not repetitions of that reality: they are, finally, irreducibly different from that reality.

Thus Barth employs myth and allegory to tell us 'an abiding human truth'. But that truth is that the individual is separate and must arrive at his/her own version of the truth. In this sense the novel is anti-mythical and anti-allegorical, and is vigorously opposed to the labours of the allegorists and mythographers.

With this provisional conclusion in mind, it is nevertheless necessary to turn for a moment to consider Glaser-Wohrer and Morrell's distinction between the different levels of allegory. Their usual distinction is between political and religious structures - and Douglas

Robinson<sup>42</sup> supports them when he goes into extreme detail in his glossary as he identifies and names equivalents. However, it should be noted that there is not a single structure of equivalence but rather several. There are the two already mentioned and there is also the pervasive linguistic pattern whereby words and phrases are substituted from the language of the university. The problem for the reader, and for George, is that the different levels operate simultaneously and thus we are forced to hold several interconnected but separate structures in our minds at the same time. For the reader, and for George, this is a constant source of confusion. Olderman's comment on this is exceedingly perceptive:

Barth's allegory is another way of expressing the modern confusion between fact and fiction, The terms of his allegory reveal that the fabulous world he creates is our world with our history, our politics, and our politicians. A great deal of the book speaks for itself because it is a fable. Like other fables of the sixties, Barth's book mixes the recognisable with the extreme - current world events with goat-boy saviours - so we are forced to admit that both or neither are possible, and that contemporary fact itself is fabulous, distinguishable from fiction only because the author has made his contrivance obvious.<sup>43</sup>

In the realms of fabulation, oscillating between the recognisable and the extreme is a possible and, by implication, a necessary process. We are not in the arena of realism but in that of the fabulous - with all the etymological baggage that word brings with it.

With Tatham's diagram to hand, and with Robinson's John Barth's Giles Goat-Boy: a study as a useful, if on occasions simplistic, guide, we can now enter into a detailed exposition of the events of the novel as hero-myth, self-contained narrative, and historical and

political 'allegory'. But beyond this, I wish to set my sights on those aspects of Giles Goat-Boy which best further my thesis that the novel marked a continuation of Barth's departure from realistic, or at least relatively realistic, fiction and his movement towards post-modernism. I shall, therefore, concentrate on the linguistic and anti-allegorical structures of the novel. As we have seen, this shift in terminology from 'allegorical' to 'anti-allegorical' is crucial, as I hope to demonstrate the ways in which Barth employs an allegorical mode solely in order to undermine it through the philosophical conclusions of the text.

This combination of language-use and anti-allegorical structure in my argument is by no means accidental, because Barth, in writing Giles Goat-Boy, faced two interconnected problems. First, the creation of a language appropriate to 'Grand Tutors' and, secondly, the creation of an anti-allegorical (or traditionally allegorical) structure in which he could express the abiding metaphysics which informs his novels. These two problems are interconnected because the use of the first-person narrator raises the question of the validity of any metaphysical structure. The refusal of objectivity (real or apparent) that results from this narratorial device necessarily involves the text in questions of relativity. Thus, the limited and opaque nature of George's narrative voice calls into doubt any metaphysical values posited as transcendent over the first level of narrative. But at the same time, the anti-allegorical structure (the second

level of narrative) mirrors this limitation. The intention of the text, and its activation, at this point, co-exist.

The reason behind the text's long period of production (5½ years), and also the reason behind many of the difficulties it presents on first reading are, I would argue, the same. That is the voice of the central narrative. It is so distinctive and so self-consciously wrought that the temptation to regard its rhetoric as utterly opaque is very great - hence the bemused and annoyed tone of many of the early reviews.<sup>44</sup> Let us look more closely at Barth's account of the writing of the book

The reason it took so long was that, while the matter of *The Sot-Weed Factor* was more complicated, the manner of Giles was more difficult. But once the narrator's voice was worked out, the writing came swiftly.<sup>45</sup>

After the initial difficulty of identifying how a Grand Tutor speaks the novel flowed easily. That is to say, Barth had found a mould into which the expression of his ideas could be poured. From this position, the novel should present no more difficulties or problems to its reader than the reading of Malory, Chaucer, or Langland. The crucial point is the acceptance of that voice. Once that is achieved, it is possible, I would argue, to 'read' the text through the frame of its rhetoric. But, of course, it is not that easy, simple and precisely because the rhetoric creates a frame which is contradictory and complex.

Peter Mercer's study of the novel's rhetoric presents a useful handle with which to grasp this problem. He

concisely analyses the particular elements which combine to produce the distinctive rhetoric

the strong internal rhythm depends on the succession of monosyllables and co-operates with the separating out of grammatical elements to produce the solemnity that is a major characteristic of the opening paragraph. It is, of course, a ludicrous solemnity ... the deliberate accenting of syllables becomes a characteristic of the book. Again the effect is towards a highly self-conscious archaism (self-conscious on the part of the author, that is, not Giles) that contributes to our sense of Giles's otherness. This Gilesian idiosyncrasy of language we may identify as the badge of his heroic claims. the whole process of the book may be figured as the engagement of this heroic rhetoric with numerous parodies of the rhetorics of American society, from the grunting of near-animality to the sterile articulacy of academicism ... the heroic rhetoric is rather invaded than engaged by other rhetorics and registers, and ... the resultant clash produces an effect more bathetic than heroic.<sup>46</sup>

and indicates, via two sets of antitheses (the heroic/bathetic and the animal/intellectual), the broad parameters within which the style of the novel as a whole oscillates. He then argues that these four basic kinds of language are increasingly synthesised and that their synthesis parallels an attempt to reconcile a series of metaphysical abstractions; an attempt which concludes in the quasi-mystical experience during the third examination in WESCAC's Belly -

In the sweet place that contained me there was no East, no West, but an entire, single, seamless campus: Turnstile, Scrapegoat Grate, the Mall, the barns, the awful fires of the Powerhouse, the balmy heights of Founder's Hill - I saw them all; rank jungles of Frumentius, Nikolay's cold fastness, teeming T'ang - all one, and one with me. Here lay with there, tick clipped tock, all serviced nothing; I and My Ladyship, all, were one.<sup>47</sup>

The proposition, and then bathetic deflation, of various rhetorical forms broadly parallels the proposition, and then bathetic deflation of, various philosophical modes. But the ineffable conclusion of this

three stage process presents an obvious problem; precisely, that the ineffable is inexpressible.

Hence the need to pass beyond this experience into

a metaphor for the only kind of novel it is now possible to write, and the only kind of life it is possible to live (possible, that is, in this novel's terms). The inclusiveness of its rhetoric, the very quality of its texture, has frustrated its aspirations to tragedy and to comedy. It thus pretends to make what it can of the frustrations, and achieves form through the denial of traditional forms.<sup>48</sup>

This insight allows Mercer to make the following general statement

In its distrust of traditional modes it repudiates comedy and ridiculous tragedy, and its distaste for the novel form it refuses to locate its meaning in the narrative structure, leaving the apparent climax inconclusive and ambiguous.<sup>49</sup>

This argument, whilst on the whole valid, seems to miss a central point in the relation of rhetorical forms to metaphysical structures in Giles Goat-Boy. That is, that, unlike The Sot-Weed Factor, this book lacks an overarching structure or purpose. By that I mean that The Sot-Weed Factor clearly took as its parodic model the eighteenth century picaresque novel and the earlier Elizabethan and Jacobean journals of exploration, and as its philosophical form the distinction between history as related and history as lived experience. Thus there was an ironic contrast between eighteenth century views of an ordered world (John Preston's vision of Fielding's plots as Swiss clocks) and twentieth century views of the world as chaotic. The 'ordered chaos' of The Sot-Weed Factor lent a clarity to the novel's intentions and realisation that overcame its confusing surfaces. On the other hand, Giles Goat-Boy



advertises itself as an extravagant and complex literary joke; not an obviously unified and consistent rhetoric like the seventeenth century [sic] pastiche of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, but a composite organisation drawing on a wide and often incongruous range of styles and registers.<sup>50</sup>

Here, the text has a series of brilliant stylistic performances but they are never united into a coherent whole; it remains a dazzling but eclectic (and possibly therefore confused) execution.

The philosophical reflection of this is the attempt to collapse a range of historical events into a single series of allegorical figures. The problems which both Scholes and Robinson face in their attempts to explain the layers of allegory are an indication of the difficulties that any critic faces in attempting to reduce this text. At different moments in the novel particular characters are symbolic of different allegorical structures.

Spielman, Maximilian: a German Jewish scientist, a key figure in developing WESCAC's power to EAT, George's foster-father. Historically he seems to refer to a composite figure of Einstein, Oppenheimer, and possibly Freud; mythologically he refers to the mentor figure Campbell described, and for which Lord Raglan uses the term 'spielman'; and philosophically he represents humanistic values of brotherly love and the Hebraistic concern for morality and obedience.<sup>51</sup>

Thus the layers of history, myth, cultural history, etc., collapse into a melange of 'splendrously musicked', but philosophically confused moments, rather than being maintained as a coherent argument - coherent because of the separation of the elements. Now, of course, allegory depends for its enactment upon its ability to be interpreted at a number of different levels, but equally so it depends upon a distinction between the different levels (at least at the point of a schematic reading). In

Giles Goat-Boy these levels are intentionally confused to such a degree that it becomes impossible to impose any coherent schema. It becomes impossible to explicate with any accuracy the import of particular incidents, and the reader is left with only George's uniqueness and naivete as a guide to one's odyssey through the text. He wanders, comically and tragically, through a series of trials each of which we may marvel at individually but which do not combine collectively into anything greater than the sum of the parts, and do not have an impact which lasts longer than the act of reading. The tones of the incidents are remembered, but their exact place within the larger scheme is not. And if it is argued that this is, in part, the intention then I would reply that I wonder whether upwards of 700 pages is not too long for such aimlessness.

This indicates that we must look elsewhere (or further) for the defining characteristics of Barth's novel. Clearly, Giles Goat-Boy is a text deeply concerned with "the status and function of language in the novel".<sup>52</sup> Or rather, it is concerned with the status and function of a number of rhetorical forms, for, within the main rhetorical mode of the production of a quasi-sacred text written in the language of a Grand Tutor, there are a number of occasions when the book addresses itself to, and overtly parodies, particular modes of language in such a way that, within the overall concern with the creation of the *Revised New Syllabus*, these usages become hurdles to be overcome on the way to the articulation of Grand Tutorial speech. At the same time, one must retain an overview of the text, seeing it as a linear progression

but also as arranged in a series of frames, each enclosing the textual and structural materials closer to the reels of the *Revised New Syllabus*.

I will deal with this latter (frame) reading first, as it sets a context within which the linear refutation of linguistic models by George is set. At the heart of this series of concentric circles is the text of the *Revised New Syllabus*. Around that is the posttape, in which it is confirmed that the whole of Giles's story is in the form of a print-out produced by WESCAC. Next, on the other hand, is the postscript to the posttape in which J.B. casts doubt on the authenticity of the posttape -

Some imposter and antigiles composed the 'Posttape' to gainsay and weaken faith in Giles's Way. Even the type of these flunked pages is different.<sup>53</sup>

In the same circle is J.B.'s 'Cover Letter' in which he gives his own account of the arrival of the *Revised New Syllabus* in his hands and of its influence upon his life. Parenthetically, it is worth pointing out that one of the influences it has had upon him by the end of the text is to bring about a shift in his rhetoric towards that of Giles - "the deliberate accenting of syllables". The outermost frame contains, on the one hand, the 'Footnote to the postscript to the posttape', which in turn casts doubt on the authenticity of the postscript

The type of the typescript of the document entitled Postscript to the Posttape is not the same as that of the Cover letter to the editors and publisher.<sup>54</sup>

It is, at the same time, an ironic commentary on the doubtful nature of the process of assigning authority to a text by the examination of manuscripts (and is thus a

side-swipe at academicism) ... the irony being, of course, compounded by the fact that in the edition of Giles Goat-Boy to which I am referring the typescript is the same throughout.

This frame also contains the Publisher's Disclaimer which is, in its own right, a brilliant parody of the art of reviewing -

Consider the difference with RNS: here fornication, adultery, even rape, yea murder itself (not to mention self-deception, treason, blasphemy, whoredom, duplicity, and wilful cruelty to others.<sup>55</sup>

Here be rapes, pursuits, swivings, walking of the plank, epic poems, fantastical changes of identity, deep philosophical discussions, more pursuits, more rapes.<sup>56</sup>

It also tells us that the text has been re-titled by the publishers, that the editor-in-chief has serious doubts about both the book's authorship and its worth as a novel.

Of course, beyond this frame there is the physical frame of the book's cover which, by its very existence and typology, casts doubt on the authenticity of all that is contained within. John Barth is the author of it all, we tell ourselves as an assurance that the ontologies of the text are as they should be, as we have learned that they should be from our readings of realist texts and of the discourses of literary criticism: but the editor-in-chief, J.B., Stoker, Giles, WESCAC, and George would all have their doubts on that score. This, I would argue, is one of the strategies that Barth employs from Giles Goat-Boy onwards as one of the ways by which he distinguishes himself from the hierarchies of ontology that condition the classic realist text - a strategy that is characteristic, in its explicitness, to post-modernism

from Flann O'Brien's At-Swim Two Birds to Gilbert Sorrentino's Mulligan Stew and Jeremy Leven's Creator (to choose but two of the most recent examples)<sup>57</sup>. The point being, that the structure of the text is a constant attempt at throwing doubts and counter-doubts forth about the existence and validity of anything contained within the book itself. A close analogy to this process is in the paintings of M.S. Escher, where objects simultaneously enclose, and are enclosed by, each other. This, I would argue, is the same basic strategy as that of the linear progress of the linguistic and allegorical structure of the novel. Both these latter strategies simultaneously posit and refute themselves.

Let me turn, now, to the linear structure of the novel, first linguistically and then allegorically. The most immediately and apparently obvious rhetorical structure in the book is that of the transposition of terms from the universe to the university, from the nation to the college, from the citizen to the student, etc. It is this transposition, along with the previously mentioned stylistic points, that create the distinctive voice of the goat-boy. Indeed, once one discovers that it is possible to read within these terms, rather than constantly trying to translate them (as Robinson does, sometimes extremely simplistically and even wrongly<sup>58</sup>), the text creates a momentum for itself such that the pace and ease with which it can be read belies its length and the carping of many critics.

Against this dominant voice Barth sets up a series of alternative forms of articulation, each of which are

overcome by the progress of George. Scott Byrd's discussion of the establishment of George's voice as the confessional tone is correct, as are the further remarks on it:

as a means of placing the book's focus almost constantly on the hero and for shifting the reader's attitude from mockery to acceptance of this hero.<sup>59</sup>

and on the single narrative voice as "a means of achieving stylistic unity".<sup>60</sup> But he is wrong to reject the two longest parodies of other forms of articulation - the *Taliped Decanus* and Bray's lecture - as being too radical in their shift away from the central voice. He is wrong because George's overcoming of alternative forms of articulation require him to encounter and overturn even the most forceful and extended demonstrations of these other forms. To do this, these forms must appear in a mode appropriate to their importance (in Barth's hierarchy of speech - the tragic drama and the academic lecture are dominant forms for George and thus require extended treatment).

These alternative forms have two functions. First, they offer a series of philosophical structures to George which ultimately appear as spurious or, at the very least, highly ambiguous. An example of this is the confusion between art and reality, as expressed in the overheard seduction of Chickie by her poetry-reading Beist lover<sup>61</sup> and George's own reading habits<sup>62</sup>. This confusion is not the same as the postmodernist desire to re-examine the boundaries between fiction and reality - exemplified by Surfiction<sup>63</sup> and Fiction and the figures of life<sup>64</sup> -

because George's confusion is, here at least, based on extreme naivete. A second set of examples can be found in the history of the development of that voice. The major alternatives George encounters can be grouped into two categories; the interpolated stories of various characters - Pete Greene, Kennard Sear, Anastasia, Alexandrov - and the two major parodies of Greek tragedy and academic discourse. In the former category George, in order to advance towards his encounter with WESCAC with any hope of success, is presented with (relatively) coherent historical accounts and world views with which to engage. The latter pair act as indications of the failure of specific forms of articulation - the adaptation of the Oedipus myth to a contemporary setting (at least, contemporary for George) breaks down into doggerel. And the academic discourses of Bray's lecture become so inextricably entwined with sub-academic footnoting and footnoting of footnotes that any positive content in the lecture is lost within the labyrinth of its own form.

So, the former category offers George four ways of seeing the world - that is, it offers ways of successfully fulfilling his Assignment Card - and as the novel progresses, one is presented by the failure of each of these world views, via George's recognition of some failing in each of the characters. Pete Greene and Leonid Alexandrov, with their partial (because one-eyed) view of the world are seen, first to have a partial view and, second, to be mutually destructive. They are both blinded, and are hence incapable of seeing the world at all. Each

presents a one-sided view, which is insufficient for George because his mission is to save all studentdom.

Kennard Sear, with his philosophy of hedonism, is finally seen to be overthrown when he is admitted to hospital with a cancer which is gradually robbing him of his sight. The clear implication here is that it is his past practices, both sexual and narcotic, which are the cause of the cancer. He, too, at the end, cannot see properly.

Anastasia is a somewhat different case because, first, she presents no real view of the world other than submission to the demands of others and, second, because she is seen rather than seeing.<sup>65</sup> A crucial element of George's Assignment is to see through His Ladyship - that is, to obtain a complete knowledge of Anastasia: "you're supposed to know me so well that we'll be the same person".<sup>66</sup> But even the most complete seeing of Anastasia is not enough and it is only when the two are united in action during the third journey through WESCAC's Belly that George achieves his previously quoted vision of the seamless campus. Thus Anastasia is also but one step on the road to the articulation of George's vision which is the *Revised New Syllabus*, because perforce the articulation must take place after the vision has ended.

In this manner, it can be seen that a large number of secondary figures in Giles Goat-Boy act as articulators of a specific vision each and all of which George must overcome in order to achieve the means of articulation whereby he can produce the *Revised New Syllabus*.



However, it is not only characters in the novel which act in this way but also those moments in the text when a specific form and manner of discourse is given time to elaborate itself. These offer, crucially, the forms which George must surpass in order to develop his own distinct discourse. If the other characters are stepping stones to a complete content, these passages to which I will now turn are stepping stones to a synthetic form. As Barth himself has said, "I'm delighted by the spurious etymology of the words tragedy and satire."<sup>67</sup> This 'spurious etymology' offers the possibility of drawing together two modes of discourse normally at odds with each other through the medium of the goat-boy. Barth obviously had similar ideas in his mind whilst composing his December 10th, 1964 State University of New York Geneseo lecture entitled "Mystery and Tragedy: the two motions of ritual heroism".<sup>68</sup> The formal intention, then, is the fusion of forms of discourse into a new form of writing. Of the many references to other discourses in Giles Goat-Boy I want to concentrate on three - the *Encyclopaedia Tammanica*, *Taliped Decanus*, and Harold Bray's commencement lecture - as a way of indicating how Barth works towards

the possibility of a post-naturalistic, post-existentialist, post-psychological, post-antinovel novel in which the astonishing, the extravagant, the heroical - in sum, the adventurous - will come out again and welcomely into its own.<sup>69</sup>

To recapitulate my earlier argument, in Giles Goat-Boy one is presented with a series of world-views (and forms of articulation) which must be overcome so that the content (and form) of the novel's vision can come into being.

In his reading of the *Encyclopaedia Tammanica* ,  
George implicitly undermines the division between fact and  
fiction -

I read from Aadvark to Zymurgy in quite the same spirit as I  
read the Old School Tales, my fancy prefacing each entry 'Once  
upon a time ...'<sup>70</sup>

One may be tempted to mock this naive reading but as the  
novel progresses and one is presented with more and more  
examples of the amalgamation of fact and fiction, the  
realistic and the fabulous, one realises that the reader  
is being led into a position akin to that of George. The  
text cannot be read according to the norms of realism or  
of fantasy. It has to be read on its own synthetic terms.

Beyond this, the novel also casts many obvious  
glances at the tragic mode - but from a satirical  
perspective. To produce another tragedy "would be  
embarrassing" but to produce a tragedy written deliberately  
or ironically would be a way of revitalising the tragic  
form. Hence *Taliped Decanus*, the transposition of *Oedipus  
Rex* both to the university setting and also (heavy-  
handedly) to a deliberately-worked tragedy. Heavy handed  
because of its over-played parallels between university  
and Thebes, its frankly appalling doggerel, and the  
chorus's performance.<sup>71</sup>

Here, the grindingly bad rhymes have become self-  
reflexive, casting an ironic glance at self-reflexive  
fiction (and at *Giles Goat-Boy* at this point, of course).  
All of this is compounded by -

At this point, while my eyes swam still, the hush in which the  
committee's last notes died was broken by a static rustle and a  
terse voice from the loudspeakers around the margin of the  
Amphitheater.

'Ladies and gentlemen: we interrupt this catharsis to bring you two special news bulletins ...'

There was a general stir; Dr. Sear muttered something about the adverse psychological effects of *catharsis interruptus*.<sup>72</sup>

The failure of this tragedy is due to its being merely imitative; it repeats what has gone before and thus, at the end, collapses into embarrassing farce. In doing so, it indicates the Giles Goat-Boy tragedy must come from new and different springs - it must be a tragedy capable of assimilating elements of farce, comedy, satire, etc.: in short, it must redefine tragedy to its own purposes.

And so to Bray's lecture. As the novel casts its gaze towards the Bildungsroman, indeed given its setting, perhaps 'Erzielungsroman' is a more appropriate appellation, and given that the novel is the history of its hero's education, it seems appropriate that Barth should include within its development of a new form a parody of an academic lecture.

But before turning to the lecture itself, let me remind the reader of Barth's 1964 remark that "it was necessary to turn my back on knowledge lest it paralyse action"<sup>73</sup>. With this in mind, it can be seen why "some of my classmates slept, some furiously took notes, some picked their noses, some played cards, but none save myself seemed distressed by what I assumed we were all hearing"<sup>74</sup>. That is why they are so unaffected by Harold Bray's overscholarly lecture. Its knowledge has paralysed them.

The lecture itself, however, captures George's attention not by its content, but by its rhetoric which presents itself in the style of a prayer.

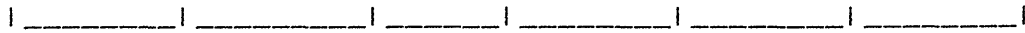
Enlighten the stupid; fire with zeal the lowest percentile; have mercy on the recreant in Main Detention and the strayed in Remedial Wisdom; be as a beacon in the Senate, a gadfly in the dorms. Be keg and tap behind the bar of every order, that the brothers may chug-a-lug Thy lore, see Truth in the bottom of their steins, and find their heads a-crack with insight. Be with each co-ed at the evening's close: paw her with facts, make vain her protests against learning's advances; take her to Thy mind's backseat, strip off preconceptions, let down illusions, unharness her from error - that she may ere the curfew be infused with Knowledge. Above all Sir, stand by me at the lectern; be chalk and notes to me; silence the mowers and stay the traffic that I may speak; awaken the drowsy, confound the heckler; bring him to naught who would digress when I would not, and would not when I would; take my words from his mouth who would take them from mine; save me from the slip of tongue and lapse of memory, from twice-told joke and unzipped fly. Doctor of doctors, vouchsafe unto me examples of the Unexampld, words to speak the Wordless; be now and ever my visual aid, that upon the empty slate of these young minds I may inscribe, bold and squeaklessly, the Answers.<sup>75</sup>

Thus Bray's lecture guides George away from the sterile academia and towards a philosophy of action. But for my present purpose, the construction of the lecture is more important, embodying as it does the over-carefully wrought construction of self-reflexive writing of all sorts. This is best exemplified by the only tangible product of the lecture George receives - "the gloss upon the gloss upon Bray's quotation from Enos Enoch's allusion to Xanthippe's remark upon Milo's misdemeanour"<sup>76</sup>. It is, surely, part of the point that the labyrinthine route by which this is obtained devalues it as a product. It is not arcane knowledge which is devalued so much as that which lies at several removes from the original object of investigation.

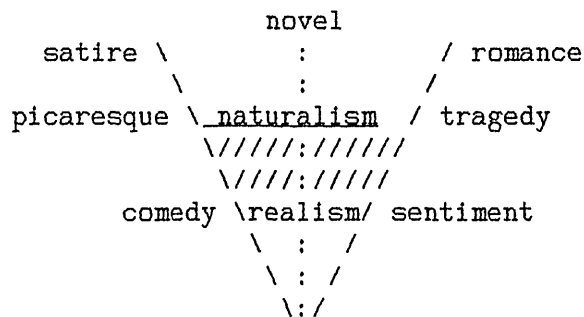
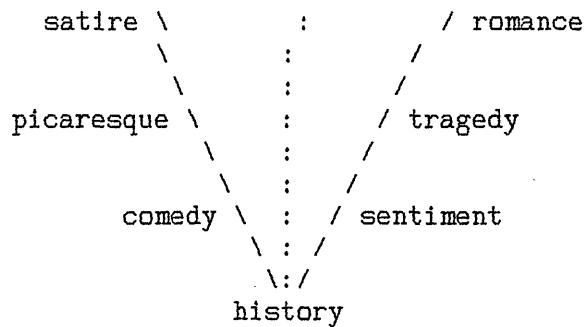
The lecture is a parody of academic discourse, both in its learned prose and in the way in which it proceeds away from the original intention of the lecture. A plethora of knowledge expanding in concentric circles away from its centre, Barth seems to say, paralyses action.

One can now see that Barth's formal intention is akin to that which I have already illustrated in George's supersession of world views as presented by the range of characters. Discourses are encountered as one progresses through Giles Goat-Boy, and they are in turn absorbed into a larger form. This is, perhaps, best illustrated by reference to Scholes's diagrams of the development of narrative forms. He begins with the following spectrum:

satire picaresque comedy history sentiment tragedy romance



He then refines this to explain the development of the novel in the following two diagrams:



These are glossed thus:

If realistic fiction first established itself (in the form we now recognise as the novel) as a result of a movement from

satire and romance in the direction of history, we can then see the subsequent development of the novel in terms of its movement away from the initial point of conjunction. If the novel began in the eighteenth century as a union of comic and sentimental impulses which we may call realistic, in the nineteenth century it moved toward a more difficult and powerful combination of picaresque and tragic impulses which we have learned to call naturalistic. The realistic novels tended towards stories of education, amelioration, integration. The naturalistic novels have been concerned with alienation and destruction. The novel reached its classic form in the nineteenth century when it was poised between the realistic and naturalistic modes ... In the twentieth century, fiction has tended to continue moving away from realism, going beyond naturalism. In this development, the novel has had difficulty holding together as a form in the face of such extremely divergent satirical and romantic possibilities. If this scheme has any historical validity, the natural combination for our era would seem to be precisely those two divergent poles of fiction, satire and romance. Here we would expect a combination of the grotesque in characterisation and the arabesque in construction. Allegory would be a likely vehicle for fiction because it traditionally has offered ways of combining satire and romance. In fiction of this sort the world and its denizens would appear fragmented and distorted, and language would be tortured in an attempt to hold the satiric and romantic views of life together.<sup>77</sup>

If this, then, is Scholes's scheme it is possible to see where Giles Goat-Boy fits into this. Quite simply, it covers the whole pattern. In doing that, Barth has attempted to reveal the inadequacy of all previous definitions of form because Giles Goat-Boy synthesises those elements which had previously been seen as antithetical. Let me reinforce this argument by reference to Peter Mercer:

This Gilesian idiosyncrasy of language we may identify as the badge of his heroic claims. The whole process of the book may be figured as the engagement of this heroic rhetoric with numerous parodies of the rhetorics of American society, from the grunting of near-animality to the sterile articulacy of academicism ... the whole synthesising effort of the book; an effort to relate the traditional dimensions of human experience - the intellectual and the physical, the heroic, the tragic, and the comic ... any understanding of *Giles Goat-Boy* must depend upon a perception of the total effort to synthesise - an effort involving the interaction of the plot, character, symbol, allegory, and rhetoric - it is important that this effort is not simply a linear one, that the book doesn't only 'work out' its synthesis. It in fact embodies its synthesis continually in its language ... in its distrust of traditional modes it repudiates comedy and ridicules tragedy, and in its distaste for the novel

form it refuses to locate its meaning in the narrative structure, leaving the apparent climax inconclusive and ambiguous<sup>7a</sup>

This returns us to a previous point: that in its encounter with previous forms and contents, Giles Goat-Boy re-enacts these forms and contents only to over-go them in pursuit of new forms and contents. As Hegel pointed out, synthesis becomes the new starting point of development and not merely the accumulation of passed theses. And as Scholes wrote:

*Giles Goat-Boy* is a great novel. Its greatness is most readily apparent in its striking originality of structure and language, an originality that depends upon a superb command of literary and linguistic tradition ... This is not an experiment but a solution - an achievement which .. in my opinion stamps Barth as the best writer of fiction we have at present, and one of the best we have ever had.<sup>7a</sup>

And if today Scholes's praise seems a little fulsome in the light of greatly increased scepticism about the kind of philosophical frame within works such as Giles Goat-Boy were set, the novel does still stand as a considerable achievement. But an achievement which, in itself, presented problems for Barth and for his contemporaries. This work was seemingly so complete and so synthetic at its time of writing, that it could not act as the basis for new work (or a new tradition). Any imitation of it would, perforce, collapse into being a mere copy. This is one reason, I would argue, that Barth turned aside from this strategy of creating synthetic 'sacred books' as a means of revitalising narrative forms into the new arena that was to become Lost in the Funhouse. In some ways, Giles Goat-Boy is as conclusive a full stop as that at the end of Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind.

The problem for both Barth and Hegel was that in order to achieve this overarching structures they had, at some level, to evacuate history as an ongoing process from their scheme. For Barth's writing of Giles Goat-Boy, as I have attempted to show, this meant abandoning the dynamics of an historically-based method of allegory in favour of a large, pre-determined and static structure which was completed at the moment of its writing. History intruded into this form only to disrupt and, in his next writings, it became a force which had to be circumvented by self-reflexivity.



The theory of a  
post-modernist fiction

At this point, it seems appropriate to pause in the direct critical discussion of Barth's novels and consider some more general critical topics. In particular, given Barth's evolution from a writer of compromised realism to one perceived as being in the vanguard of post-modernism, we should consider the historical situation and the aesthetic status of this latter mode. This, unfortunately, might seem to necessitate an investigation into the development of literary forms over approximately the last 150 years! For Barth's progress from realism to post-modernism is a microcosm of the more general development in the (perhaps self-appointed) avant-garde of literature.

In some ways the dispute over post-modernism is nothing more than a continuation of one of the oldest debates in literary criticism. Put simply, it is the dispute as to whether literature is (or should be) primarily imitative or expressive; whether it is, to paraphrase the title of M.H. Abrams's seminal study, a mirror or a lamp.

Clearly, the views of a writer or critic on this subject will govern their opinion of a particular mode of writing. For example, a critic wholly committed to an imitative theory of literature will see surrealism as a regressive or minor school of work. But equally, a writer or critic's understanding of the world beyond literature will govern which forms of writing are seen as imitative and which as expressive. For example, a critic who is in agreement with Hardy's notion of the "immanent will" will see Hardy's novels as mimetic whereas a Lukácsian critic would see the irrationalism of surrealism as expressive.

Thus, one must identify these two axes in any work before that work itself can be positioned within the overall debate. This is a necessary task if we are not to be locked into a critical model which regards each work as a separate and autonomous unit. I am not concerned at this point to place any value on the relative places of works within this field, merely to indicate how polemics come about. One can, of course, introduce other dimensions to this model in order to build it into a more comprehensive account. One thing is immediately obvious, however. Namely, that no one opinion can be judged to be right within the terms of the model itself. To any proposition, an exact opposite is always possible.

How do these propositions come about? My immediate response is that it is through the action of history. I do not believe that realism or modernism (or any other school of writing) is the product of isolated individuals creating literature in a vacuum. Rather, specific forms are generated by the interaction of a whole series of elements. The following list is intended as an adumbration rather than as comprehensive. Individual psychology, authorial gender, race and class, domestic and social situation of the author (and of the author's dependents), prevailing theories and practices of literature, previously prevailing theories and practices of literature, the author's conscious world view, the impingement of other world views upon the author, the movement and action of history on both broad and narrow spectrums, the means of production and distribution of literature. Even this rudimentary sketch of a materialist

theory of the production of literature shows that abandoning the 'mystery of creation' does not produce a crude and reductive analysis of literary work.'

This, then, may give one some sense of the ways in which the contours of particular works, and of the propositions about those works, are produced. Indeed, Eagleton's project in Criticism and Ideology and The Rape of Clarissa, Jameson's The Political Unconscious, and several other works within the same line<sup>2</sup>, go some way to putting this process to work. An analysis of the extent to which both are indebted to the methodology developed by Caudwell in the Thirties, rather than to his detailed propositions, is beyond the scope of this present work but would indicate, it seems to me, the *existence* - decidedly not the dominance - of this project within British and American literary theoretical thinking for much of this century. This project also offer a means for accounting for postmodernism. Let me propose a simplified paradigm for a history of literature over the last 150 years as a guide to what I mean.

For realism, the individual consciousness would be the organising principle; a fixed and known entity which addresses itself to a set of fixed external entities. The author, then, is an omniscient figure who operates through the transparent medium of language in no way governed by any framework of ideological or conceptual factors. In short, this is Lukács's definition of realism.

True great realism thus depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. Measured by this criterion, artistic trends determined by either exclusive introspection or exclusive extraversion equally impoverish and distort reality ... The central category

and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations ... what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development.<sup>3</sup>

For this model, modernism represents a crisis in which the internal world becomes subject to the pressures of the unconscious and the mind begins to lose its role as a universal measure. The external world becomes, at the very least, potentially unknowable as social forces escape from human control. Capital develops a momentum of its own which increasingly governs the actions of individuals from both the proletarian and bourgeois classes. Indeed, the individual becomes part of a social class - whether or not this is obvious to that individual. This had, of course, always been true, but before the nineteenth century the areas of apparent escape from social determination had outweighed those clearly under its domain. With the closing of the American frontier, the last haven of individualist destiny was lost.

The fixed entities of realism began to break down and, perhaps even more importantly, the separation between the external and internal worlds was elided. Hence the strictures of Lukács in The Ideology of Modernism<sup>4</sup>. This collapse of an ordered hierarchy of a rationalist conception of the world is most clearly, if wrongly, polemicised against by the phenomenon of Zhdanovism. The crisis continued as conceptions of the internal and external worlds became steadily more intransigent, and the two began to separate with Freud leading the march in one direction and the mechanical materialism of stalinism leading in the other. Existentialism is probably the most

familiar philosophical reflection of this divorce, with the external world seen as essentially unknowable. Because of this, inherited, felt-primacy of the former, the imagination is allowed free play and the external world is relegated to being unknowable and possibly even non-existent in any meaningful sense. The continuity between the self and the social world, whereby the authorial mind could reflect reality, breaks up before the increasing inability of the mind to account for the world as capitalism and conceptions thereof develops. Capitalism and its self-consciousness demand that the individual behave in a way governed by social position. This and the social system's ever more clearly revealed barbarity as it resorts to ever greater violence in order to perpetuate itself, drives the individual away from any belief in his/her capacity to understand the world in any coherent fashion. In these circumstances language, which was the transparent cement which bound the two halves of the realist equation together, becomes problematic. Attention shifts from language as a means of communication to language as a centre of concern - in the terms of structuralism, it becomes opaque. Joyce's premature recognition of this fact accounts for Ellman's judgement of him, that "we are still learning to be his contemporaries"<sup>5</sup>. Joyce predicted, fifty years ago, the circumstances in which we we now operate.

The demand for novelty is a direct reflection of the needs of capitalism, a system which constantly consumes and therefore must revolutionise itself. As it becomes the dominant world system capitalism, in an ever louder voice,

calls for innovation. Modernism's capacity to fulfil this injunction is limited, by virtue of its legacy from tradition, from its predecessor realism. So, modernism is replaced in the most advanced forward position as the literary reflection of these social developments by postmodernism. This form of writing exists as an attempt to relate itself always to the most forward positions in the development of social and literary production and in doing so, in Marshall Berman's phrase

[has] embraced a mystique of post-modernism, which strives to cultivate ignorance of modern history and culture, and speaks as if all human feeling, expressiveness, play, sexuality, and community have only just been invented - by the postmodernists - and were unknown, even inconceivable, before last week.<sup>6</sup>

To be one step behind is to be obsolete. But in doing so, postmodernism abandons any sense of history as a significant force in the shaping of the world as perceived. Here, I believe, lies the root of the single most characteristic feature of postmodernism: its removal of the distinction between fiction and reality. If history is removed as the yardstick by which one judges imaginative production, then the way is opened for the appearance of fantastic versions of the past which whirl by in a faster and faster dance upon which the only limitation is the capacity of the individual imagination.

The obvious obverse of this response is the constant production of spurious notions of imaginative invention. The old is 'rediscovered' as the new precisely because the perspective of history has been lost. The operation of this process is at its clearest in the arena of popular

music where the old is constantly presented and re-presented as the newest possible.

But at the same time postmodernism reacts to this mad push by seeking some 'still centre' which completely negates the impact of development. In the specific case of Barth, this is reflected in his employment of myth as a narrative source, in the use of romance as a source of meaning detached from the social world, in the resurrection of 'obsolete' ways of narration. In other postmodernists, the presence of this is indicated by the importance given to play as a means of achieving aesthetic pleasure.

Obviously this initial model needs considerable elaboration, not least because it inhabits predominantly the realm of literature and does not attempt to account in detail for the material factors which shaped the artistic response I have outlined. To say that it is, then, an idealist model is to state the obvious; it is, perhaps, more incisive to say that it is written as a justification of art from the position of the artist.

Let us, then, return to the figure whose presence is shadowed in the above analysis: Georg Lukács. Any discussion of this kind is, perforce, dominated by him because it is in his work that one finds the most coherent, if tendentious, discussion of the rise of realism and modernism as literary modes. His championship of realism as the literary mode is based, it seems to me, on his thesis that it is within this form that one discovers an inherent cognitive capacity. This, in turn,



is a position which is an elaboration of Engels's remarks on Balzac.

Balzac was thus compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices, that he saw the necessity of the downfall of his favourite nobles, and described them as people deserving no better fate; and that he saw the real men of the future where, for the time being, they alone were to be found - that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, and one of the grandest features of old Balzac.<sup>7</sup>

Let us be clear what is being stated here; the production of sensuous, 'typical' figures forces the writer, despite his/her ideological standpoint, to reveal the truth: that is, content is compelled by form. Indeed, only this form is capable of producing content in this fashion.

Presented in this fashion, this position is obviously anathema to Lukács:

What determines the style of a given work of art? How does the intention determine the form? (We are concerned here, of course, with the writer's conscious intention). The distinctions that concern us are not those between stylistic 'techniques' in the formalistic sense. It is the view of the world, the ideology or weltanschauung underlying a writer's work, that counts. And it is the writer's attempt to reproduce this view of the world which constitutes his 'intention' and is the formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing. Looked at in this way, style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather, it is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content.<sup>8</sup>

But the fact remains, as Brecht demonstrated, that once and if one accepts Lukács's polemic against the irrational nature of the varieties of modernist thinking, it still remains true that his objection to modernism(s) is formalistic. This point is made succinctly in the title of Stefan Morawski's article, Mimesis - Lukács's Universal Principle.<sup>9</sup>

It is not, however, enough simply to brush Lukács's insistence on realism aside as a formalist deviation from

classical marxism's prioritisation of content as the shaping force in a literary work. One must attempt to give reasons for it. Put baldly, Lukács's political commitment to the politics of the popular front exerted a decisive influence on his aesthetic position. This argument is implicit in the writings of both Löwy and Deutschner:

He elevated the Popular Front from the level of tactics to that of ideology; he projected its principle into philosophy, literary history and aesthetic criticism.<sup>10</sup>

Nothing illustrates this tendency more than Lukács's attitude to Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht. For him, Mann represented rationalism, 'patrician dignity', and the respectability of the bourgeois tradition, as opposed to Nazism. Lukács's attempts to forge an ideological united front with Mann were the cultural equivalent of the Comintern's tactic of political coalitions with the non-fascist bourgeoisie (which entailed the renunciation of any class position). Brecht, on the other hand, was rejected outright because 'Brecht's utter irreverence for the bourgeois man, his provocatively plebian sympathies, his extreme artistic unconventionality - so many dialectical counterpoints to Mann's outlook - implicitly conflicted with the mood of the Popular Front and were alien to Lukács'.<sup>11</sup>

This requires a little more elaboration.

Fortini<sup>12</sup> and Witte<sup>13</sup> attempt to demonstrate the way in which the politics of the popular front - which can probably best be characterised as an insistence on the values of bourgeois democratic humanism in opposition to the anti-humanism of fascism - are reflected in the aesthetic theorisations of Lukács. This theory, in turn, is underpinned by Lukács's philosophical position (which receives its most coherent and polemical expression in The Destruction of Reason)<sup>14</sup>. Let us leave aside the veracity of this position and summarise it in its own terms: irrationalism and anti-humanism are two sides of the same philosophical coin and it is a currency which is used to devalue not only the scientific and cognitive aspirations

of marxism but also the entire lineage of western humanist and rationalist philosophy. The irrationalist position is most succinctly expressed in Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy<sup>15</sup>, in which the opposition between Apollonian and Dionysian world views is posed and post-socratic philosophy condemned for its adherence to the former. Lukács, who sees marxism as the culmination of all hitherto existing rationalist and humanist philosophies, attempts to recruit both the forces of marxist philosophy and those of progressive bourgeois philosophy into a mutual opposition to the irrationalists. At the same time, he champions that artistic form which he sees as the high-point of progressive bourgeois art - the realist novel - as the artistic form. This he then opposes to those aesthetic forms which he sees as the representatives of anti-humanism and irrationalism - particularly all variants of modernism.

This is not, as should be obvious, merely a personal preference for Lukács. It is founded upon a cognitive claim for realism.

The literature of realism, based on the Aristotelian concept of man as *zōon politikon*, is entitled to develop a new typology for each new phase in the evolution in a society. It displays the contradictions within society and within the individual in the context of a dialectical unity ... Let me say here that, in any work of art, perspective is of overriding importance. It determines the course and content; it draws together the threads of the narration; it enables the artist to choose between the important and the superficial, the crucial and the episodic. The direction in which characters develop is determined by perspective, only those features being described which are material to their development. The more lucid the perspective - as in Moliere or the Greeks - the more economical and striking the selection.

Modernism drops this selective principle. It asserts that it can dispense with it, or can replace it with its dogma of the *condition humaine* ... By concentrating on formal criteria, by isolating technique from content and exaggerating its importance, these critics refrain from judgement on the social

or artistic significance of subject-matter. They are unable, in consequence, to make the aesthetic distinction between realism and naturalism. This distinction depends on the presence or absence in a work of art of a 'hierachy of significance' in the situations and characters presented. Compared with this, formal categories are of secondary importance.<sup>16</sup>

This particular convergence of philosophy and aesthetics is not argued in a political vacuum. It is the product of his defence of the politics of the popular front in the wake of the disasters of 'Third Period' stalinism, and its contours are set by Lukács's earlier humiliation in the arena of politics. In the face of stalinist ultra-leftism in full cry, Lukács defended his conception of marxism as the inheritor of all that was best in the era of the bourgeois revolution. The discrediting of stalinism in the wake of 1956 and 1968, and the concurrent emergence of the new left, has much to do with his retrospective (and now posthumous) triumph. It is clear, perhaps most obviously in the early work of Fredric Jameson, that contemporary marxism has little, if any, time for the crudities of such stalinist hacks as Zhdanov and Radek.

What is equally clear in these more recent writers is a felt-need to engage with modernism from a position that is simultaneously critical of, and within, the typologies of modernism. The most cursory reading of Lukács reveals his inability to do this. To repeat, with his conception of marxism, as is outlined above, the project of modernism is incomprehensible precisely because, from an historical perspective, it represents a series of assaults on the precepts of classical bourgeois thought.

It is marked by pessimism, with foreshadowings of the modern existentialist Angst; the Modernist writer tends to look down on

a vast scene of frustration and defeat. Modernist art embodies doubts about the capacities of the reason with sometimes a solipsistic questioning of the very existence of an outer reality. We have in Modernism a shift from life to art; art becomes a substitute for life, or a refuge from it. In keeping with the doubts about the reason, Modernists are often concerned with mystical or occult experience.<sup>17</sup>

This is expanded, from a different perspective, in the perceptive essay by Bradbury and McFarlane:

It is one of the larger commonplaces of cultural history that we can distinguish a kind of oscillation in style over periods of time, an ebb and flow between a predominantly rational world-view (Neo-classicism, Enlightenment, Realism) and alternate spasms of irrational or subjective endeavour (Baroque, Sturm und Drang, Romanticism). The resultant temptation is to regard ages as being identifiably one or the other: head or heart is in control, reason or emotion dominates, the cultural pattern is 'naiv' or 'sentimentalisch', Apollo or Dionysus claims allegiance. It may help us to understand Modernism if we recognise that these spirits can cross and interfuse. They are, arguably, not fixed poles between which the spirit oscillates, but are subject to the dynamism of change, moving on convergent paths. Suppose, then, that the period we are calling Modern shows us not the mere rehabilitation of the irrational after a period of ordered Realism, or for that matter the reverse, a period of Classicism after a phase of Romanticism, but rather a compounding of all these potentials: the interpenetration, the reconciliation, the coalescence, the fusion - perhaps an appallingly explosive fusion - of reason and unreason, intellect and emotion, subjective and objective.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever one thinks of Lukács's adherence to a belief in the capacity of reason, it is strange that this marxist appears at times incapable of interrogating the forms of his own ideology and demonstrating the material base from which they have grown. What I mean by this can best be explained by referring back to my earlier remarks on the revelation of capitalism as a barbaric system and in the light of the following passage:

Now to take note of some connections between the new temper of Modernism and these features of the epoch of imperialism. First, the new skepticism about the powers of human reason. We recall that the confidence in the reason that developed in the Enlightenment was rooted in a social order that appeared rationally comprehensible and seemed devoted to the eventual total service of man in a way the rational understanding could accept. At least these seem to be some of the implications of

the relationship between the rise of the bourgeoisie and the Enlightenment. In the new epoch of imperialism, when the irrationalities of the system are a constant affront to the reason, when no comprehensible principle appears to be in operation, when the dynamo of imperialist rivalries and their accompanying war drives are out of sight, diminished confidence in the reason is hardly surprising. The new sense of powerlessness also has a factual basis; it corresponds to the diminished leverage just mentioned. If with the beginning of Modernism we are entering upon the century of the literature of victimisation, the reason is that in this century the actual condition of victimisation becomes widespread; at the same time, because the new industrialisation promises an amelioration which under monopoly control it cannot deliver, the subjective feeling of powerlessness becomes more insupportable. This takes us to another connection. Loss of sense of human power is the most severe affront to human dignity; hence the peculiar anguish that now enters into the Western sensibility and specifically into Modernist literature. And there is no difficulty in establishing still another connection. With the reason jettisoned, with man familiarising himself with his new identity as victim of history, obsessed now with a new quality of anguish, the logic that leads from life to art becomes compelling. Hence the shift from that central responsibility for society that we associate with Arnold to the exclusive preoccupation with art that comes in with Pater. Increasingly men look to art for the satisfaction and sense of freedom that life denies. The art-for-art's sake movement is a major manifestation of Modernism. And this gives rise to still another connection. The new interest in the supernatural, the mystical, and the occult can be regarded as a kind of parallel to the shift from life to art. The supernatural is explored in the search for a meaningful experience that real life cannot supply.<sup>12</sup>

What this seems to indicate is a change of temper in artistic perception of the world. Lukács lionises the nineteenth century realists for their capacity for analytical description of the movements of society but attacks the modernists for their description of social structure - even though this social structure is very different from that depicted in the realist novels. Content determines form, that much we have learned from Lukács; but then he accuses modernism of not being realism, despite his recognition of changed circumstances. This is curious, and indeed might be incomprehensible, until we see that Lukács's aesthetics is prescriptive - for him the realist mode is always the mode against which

all others are judged and found wanting precisely because they do not operate within the typology of realism.

More than a brief speculation on the reasons for this lacuna in Lukács's thought is beyond my province. However, one explanation would appear to lie in the increasing level of prescriptive aesthetics among the self-styled marxist critics (stalinist would seem to me to be a more accurate description from which very few escape - Andre Breton and Leon Trotsky are perhaps the only two entirely untainted). This is particularly the case after the 1934 congress of soviet writers when 'socialist realism' became the aesthetic mode for socialist writers. More pertinent to my central argument is an explanation of how the theoreticians and practitioners of modernism and postmodernism have responded to this charge.

These responses have been of two kinds. First, variants around the argument of art-for-art's sake; that is, a complete rejection of Lukács's mimetic yardstick. Because of this complete rejection, I would argue, the possibility of any dialogue from within the parameters of aesthetics is impossible. Indeed, Lukács - and those others who polemicised against this position - characteristically resort to extra-literary arguments; to arguments about the historical interrogation of the sources of the central ideas of aestheticism. The second response is more apposite to my argument. It centres around the changing nature of our understanding and perception of the world. Because of the nature of these changes (especially because of the work of Freud and the structuralist linguists), it becomes necessary to describe

that world in new ways. Particularly, as the project of rational explanation of the external world is undermined the focus of attention becomes the way in which perceptions of that world are mediated through the individual consciousness. The process of apprehension becomes the style of high modernism. This is, to scatter but two names and titles, the period of Joyce's Ulysses and Pound's Cantos, - the period of 'high modernist' formal experimentation and of *psychological* realism.

This is, equally, exactly the point of most serious separation in the debate between Lukács and those marxists most vigorously opposed to his aesthetic stance: particularly Brecht and Benjamin but also Adorno. Gillian Rose correctly states the two positions thus:

... on the one hand, it meant the cult of the mind, and the disassociation of art from any social base or political responsibility ... on the other hand, it meant the adoption and development of new forms of non-realist art in order to exploit their political potential for the mass age.<sup>20</sup>

Again, the adoption of one position or the other is not based solely on personal preference, as is clear when one remembers Brecht's project of seeking out aesthetic forms which reproduced the changed circumstances of the twentieth century. Brecht succinctly summarises this when discussing Lukács's formalist fetishism -

Whether a work is realistic or not cannot be determined merely by checking whether or not it is like existing works which are said to be realistic, or were realistic in their time. In each case, one must compare the depiction of life in a work of art with the life itself that is being depicted, instead of comparing it with another depiction.<sup>21</sup>

This is the crucial point. If the organic - humanist and rationalist - world has been disrupted then one produces



and needs to acknowledge aesthetic forms which reflect this disruption. That much is clear when Adorno praises Kafka when he writes "the texts collide in the distortion to which they bear witness"<sup>222</sup>. But also, as Brecht would argue, when that anti-humanist reality is capable of presenting itself as coherent, it is necessary to seek out artistic practices which accentuate the contradiction between this everyday appearance of coherence and that which is possible and realistic: artistic practices which disrupt appearance in order to demonstrate the essence concealed beneath. It is, in many ways, the same aim as Lukács had in mind but it has been stripped of its insistence on realism as the inherently most advanced form of artistic cognition. As Brecht wrote

We shall establish that the so-called sensuous mode of writing - where one can smell, taste and feel everything - is not automatically to be identified with a realistic mode of writing; we shall acknowledge that there are works which are sensuously written and which are not realistic, and realistic works which are not written in a sensuous style. We shall have to examine carefully the question whether we really develop a plot best when our ultimate objective is to reveal the spiritual life of the characters. Our readers will perhaps find that they have not been given the key to events if, led astray by various artistic devices, they experience only the spiritual agitation of the heroes. By adopting the forms of Balzac and Tolstoy without testing them thoroughly, we might weary our readers - the people - as much as these writers often do themselves. *Realism is not a mere question of form.* Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists ... If we wish to have a living and combative literature, which is fully engaged with reality and fully grasps reality, a truly popular literature, we must keep step with the rapid development of reality. (Emphasis added)<sup>223</sup>

The relevance of the whole of the above, I hope, becomes clear when we return to my earlier discussion of Barth's obvious dissatisfaction with realism in the writing of The End of the Road. It is a dissatisfaction that has much in common with literary structuralism's

objections to realism. It asks, as it were, the same questions as the latter and has the same starting-point in seeing realism as an inadequate literary means for a representation of reality. My purpose here is to discuss this unhappiness with realism and the consequent solutions offered by Barth, the structuralists and the practitioners of the nouveau roman (specifically Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute). It must be said at the outset that this motley crew offer widely divergent solutions to a similar set of problems - Barth consciously 'goes back in order to go forward' whilst Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute attempt to push forward into a new theory and practice of literature.

The root of this mutual discontent with realism had a two-fold basis: generally, with the theory of language associated with realism and, more specifically, with the literary forms and conventions generated thereby. To recap, the realist theory of language (associated with John Locke and the Port Royal grammarians) saw language as a system of representation - "ideas are the signs of things and words are the signs of ideas".<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the veracity of this correspondence is guaranteed by the subject, by the speaker:

what criteria exist to ensure the correct use of a given word to refer to a particular set of ideas/things? The guarantee is provided by the subject. In secure possession of his consciousness and its contents, which can be distinguished, arranged and generally put to work at least in principle prior to the existence of language, the subject assigns meanings to words and ensures their correct usage. This doctrine of language, therefore, depends upon a certain ordering of philosophical categories - one which, in the course of the seventeenth century, in the writings of Descartes and Locke and the traditions deriving there from, accords primacy to the subject as the self-defining point from which the orders of thought and of the world are constructed. Language, in this

epistemology, becomes a simple receptacle for the contents of consciousness - essential from the point of view of convenience as a store of information and a means of communication, but subordinate to and dependent upon the intuitive relation between the subject and his ideas and impressions.<sup>25</sup>

Now, we saw earlier (in Morrell) a detailed explanation of Barth's objection to this theory and also saw (in The End of the Road) a Saussurean response in Jake's discussion of horses and grammar-books and also in his insistence that the text of The End of the Road was an arbitrary and flawed account of the reality of the events on which the text is based. Beyond this (and here Barth diverges from structuralism) Jake proposes a pragmatic solution to this crisis by his invocation of the 'concoisseur' as a figure capable of perceiving these distortions and then smiling knowingly at them. Barth does not propose an engagement with the problems presented by this difficulty but forges ahead to finish his novel, remaining all the while within the problematic of realism. This attachment to the continued production of literature despite technical and theoretical difficulties remains an abiding concern through to Chimera, where the difficulties themselves become the subject of the text.

Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, proposes a much closer connection between theory and practice, attempting to produce a new practice of literature from his theoretical objections. In his essay From realism to reality, Robbe-Grillet attacks the notion that reality pre-exists its description in language and the consequent idea that realism can aspire to reality. His argument is two-fold: first, that

when a style or writing has lost its initial vitality, force, and violence, when it has become a vulgar recipe, an academic formula that its followers only respect out of routine or laziness, without even questioning its necessity, there is no doubt we need a return to the real in order to challenge the old formulae and find new forms to take their place. the discovery of reality can only continue its advance if people are willing to abandon outworn forms.<sup>26</sup>

and secondly that

not only does everyone see his own version of reality in the world but that it is precisely the novel that creates this reality. Fiction writing, unlike reportage, eye-witness accounts or scientific descriptions, isn't trying to give information - it constitutes reality. It never knows what it is looking for, it doesn't know what it has to say; it is invention, invention of the world and of man, constant, and continually self-questioning invention. All those - whether politicians or others - who only want to find stereotypes in books, and who, more than anything else, are afraid of the spirit of enquiry, can only be on their guard against literature.<sup>27</sup>

The thrust of his argument is a rejection of

verisimilitude - "I am irritated by objections like:

'Things just don't happen like that in life'" - in favour

of an individually perceived and constituted reality:

In this new realism, therefore, there is no longer the slightest question of *verisimilitude*. The little detail which 'makes you think it's true' is no longer of any interest to the novelist, either on the stage of the world or in literature. The thing that strikes him - and which reappears, after several reincarnations, in what he writes - is more likely, on the contrary, to be the little detail that strikes a *false note*<sup>28</sup>

This objective becomes the driving-force behind, most obviously, La Jalousie and its attempt to recreate the perceptions of an obsessively jealous husband.

In Susan Sontag's essay on Nathalie Sarraute we can see an even more overt statement of this project

Sarraute's case against realism is a convincing one. Reality is not that unequivocal; life is not that lifelike. The immediate cozy recognition that the lifelike in most novels induces is, and should be, suspect. ... Sarraute is right, too, that the novel's traditional machinery for furnishing a scene, and describing and moving about characters does not justify itself.<sup>29</sup>

Sontag's support for this effort is qualified by her wishing to retire "the metaphor of the work of art as a representation of reality".<sup>30</sup> I agree, however, with Joe David Bellamy's large objection to Sontag (raised in his interview with her in The New Fiction<sup>31</sup>) that her discussion of Sarraute, and her own work, are primarily concerned with a more sufficient representation of reality than traditional realism, and with a rejection of the abstract formulae of classical realism in favour of new forms which are more closely approximate to contemporary perceptions of reality (or realities). This move Bellamy characterises as 'psychological realism'.

Robbe-Grillet's essay, historically, neatly brackets the writing of The Sot-Weed Factor (it was first written in 1956 and revised in 1963) and has in common with our present subject both a rejection of realism as a form for the novel and also a weakening of the hold of representation as an adequate aesthetic theory. But Barth's practical solution to this double problem differs radically from that proposed by the practitioners of the nouveau roman. Barth's principal objection to representation is its attempt to obscure the status of art as artifice. He attempts, in the writing of The Sot-Weed Factor, to redress this obfuscation precisely by emphasising the artificial nature of the novel. To do this he returns to the beginnings of the novel, to the point at which it consciously imitates other documents in an attempt to acquire a veneer of veracity. The purpose of this, as Barth amply demonstrates in The Literature of Exhaustion, is to make a work of art which is a

representation of a representation of reality. By so fundamentally challenging notions of the historical development of the form, by rupturing our conceptions of how the novel should be written by writing a novel in the way that it had been written, Barth forces his reader to recognise the separation of his art from our shared reality.

This raises two immediate problems. First, it assumes that the reader is sufficiently conversant with the history of the novel to apprehend Barth's purpose. Secondly, that we are prepared to accept Barth's virtuoso performance as a substitute for our, perhaps outmoded but at least commonly shared, perceptions of realities. The former problem has some validity but Jerome Klinkowitz's argument that it is "a regressive literature of exhaustion ... an elitist, academic diversion"<sup>32</sup>; an example to be passively received rather than emulated, employed by others as a means of escape from the grave of the 'dead' novel; is only partially convincing. Convincing, because it is a salutary reminder of the dangers of obscurity inherent in a project of this kind, but only partially so because the only alternatives he can offer are a series of writers whose works, after commanding what I would regard as a spurious position in the avant-garde of fiction, have, with the exception of Kurt Vonnegut, lapsed into silence or lost their access to publication. Now it is certainly true that to come to grips with Barth one needs to be conversant with the traditions of the novel and with the repeatedly perceived impasse that it had apparently reached as a form by the late 1960s. Conversely, I would

argue that it is not an unreasonable demand precisely because Barth has continued to write and to produce inventive fiction worthy of our critical attention whilst the majority of the others have fallen by the wayside into silence. The generation Klinkowitz so eloquently champions in Literary Disruptions have, like so many other of the phenomena of that period, surrendered their position as the avant-garde and become regarded as an interesting backwater in the history of culture.<sup>33</sup>

Let us turn, then, to the argument that John Barth presents in The Literature of Exhaustion as a defence of his writing of The Sot-Weed Factor. He begins by discussing the necessity of being technically up to date, of writing in a way which is "usable in the making or understanding of genuine works of contemporary art".<sup>34</sup> Whilst the rhetoric of this phrase outweighs its analytic content, it is a clear indication of Barth's concerns. He concludes

However, art and its forms and techniques live in history and certainly do change. I sympathise with a remark attributed to Saul Bellow, that to be technically up to date is the least important attribute of a writer, though I would have to add that this least important attribute may be nevertheless essential. In any case, to be technically out of date is likely to be a genuine defect: Beethoven's Sixth Symphony or the Chartres Cathedral if executed today would be merely embarrassing. A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them considerably less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who were also technically contemporary: Joyce and Kafka, for instance, in their time, and in ours, Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>35</sup>

In continuation, his discussion turns to Beckett and the ways in which he has developed a form capable of expressing the 'felt ultimacies' of his time - a form which progresses towards silence. The thrust of this

argument is quite clear when Barth enumerates what he sees as the 'felt ultimacies' ... "everything from weaponry to theology, the celebrated dehumanisation of society, and the history of the novel".<sup>36</sup> In the face of this battery the novel retreats into silence, the silence 'of which the universe is made'<sup>37</sup>.

But the language of action consists of rest as well as movement, and so in the context of Beckett's progress, immobile, silent figures still aren't altogether ultimate. How about an empty, silent stage, then, or blank pages (an ultimacy already attained in the nineteenth century by that avant-gardiste of East Aurora, New York, Elbert Hubbard, in his "Essay on Silence") - a happening where nothing happens, like Cage's "4'33'" performed in an empty hall?<sup>38</sup>

And, given this, it is now possible to qualify the earlier statement about Beethoven and Chartres cathedral by writing

I mentioned earlier that if Beethoven's Sixth were composed today, it would be an embarrassment; but clearly it wouldn't be, necessarily, if done with ironic intent by a composer quite aware of where we've been and where we are.<sup>39</sup>

For Barth, one of the ultimacies is the approaching end of the novel, "if not narrative literature generally, if not the printed word altogether".<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it becomes the primary ultimacy for him and he goes on to suggest how this ultimacy may be turned into material and means for new work: by writing "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author".<sup>41</sup>

And he completes the argument with the following (lengthy) statement:

If this sort of thing sounds unpleasantly decadent, nevertheless it's about where the genre began, with Quixote imitating Amadis of Gaul, Cervantes pretending to be the Cid Hamete Benengeli (and Alonso Quijano pretending to be Don Quixote), or Fielding parodying Richardson. 'History repeats itself as farce' - meaning, of course, in the form or mode of farce. not that history is farcical. The imitation (like the Dadaist echoes in



the work of the 'intermedia' types) is something new and may be quite serious and passionate despite its farcical aspect. This is the important difference between a proper novel and a deliberate imitation of a novel, or a novel imitative of other sorts of documents. The first attempts (has been historically inclined to attempt) to imitate actions more or less directly, and its conventional devices - cause and effect, linear anecdote, characterisation, authorial selection, arrangement, and interpretation - can be and have long been objected to as obsolete notions, or metaphors for obsolete notions: Robbe-Grillet's essays "For a new novel" come to mind. There are replies to these objections, not to the point here, but one can see that in any case they're obviated by imitations-of-novels, which attempt to represent not life directly but a representation of life. In fact such works are no more removed from 'life' than Richardson's or Goethe's epistolary novels are: both imitate 'real' documents, and the subject of both, ultimately, is life, not the documents. A novel is as much a piece of the real world as a letter, and the letters in The Sorrows of Young Werther are, after all, fictitious.<sup>42</sup>

This then is the necessary basis for an understanding of The Sot-Weed Factor; a reading of the text as a conscious and ironic imitation of the novel in the form of a novel. The very writing of the text becomes the central purpose of its writing. Earl Rovit's objections to The Sot-Weed Factor, outlined in a previous chapter, now fall to the ground precisely because he does not perceive that the paradox of an eighteenth century novel written in the twentieth century is not an abandonment of the resources developed after the eighteenth century but, paradoxically, an attempt to revitalise the novel by stepping back beyond the exhaustion of resources that that development implies. In the words of a metaphor of which Barth later becomes very fond, it is a step backwards in order to go forwards.

It is also the motivation for a major change in Barth's mode of narration, away from a first-person narrative to the third person. A move away from the absolute presence of the narrator on The End of the Road, in the shape of Jake Horner, and towards the author as an

implicit structuring force. The historical parallel to this is the shift from Defoe to Fielding, and its corollary within the text is the relativisation of the central characters.

This latter point needs expansion. In The End of the Road, Jake's fate is the heart of the novel. Other characters exist only insofar as they play a part directly in Jake's consciousness. Peggy Rankin enters the novel, disappears, and then re-appears. In the intervening section of the novel, in the period she is absent from the text, she is unimportant and completely absent. She exists solely as a tool in Jake's progress. And, to move even closer to the centre of the novel, Joe and Rennie are absented completely from the text during Jake's periods of weatherlessness. The novel depends on Jake's articulation of his individual consciousness.

In The Sot-Weed Factor, Eben's fate is inextricably linked to the fates of the other characters. The text is a map across which the characters progress along different routes. The words of the text articulate Eben's progress but, because of the almost hermetic nature of the plot, we imply the progress of other characters. When Anna, Burlingame, Joan Toast, etc., are absent from the page, they are still implicitly present. Just as the content of the novel tells us that an historical account is one rendering of the total material of the past, so its form indicates that the novel before us is one account of the total material of The Sot-Weed Factor. Ebenezer Cooke's poem fixes and structures this account, but the question

can be asked - why not Henry Burlingame, Anna Cooke, Joan Toast's stories?

A second reading makes this still clearer. I referred earlier to John Preston's discussion of double perspective in Tom Jones, and it is a discussion which which could apply equally, indeed more than equally, to The Sot-Weed Factor. My own reading brought to mind Barth's diagram, reproduced by Morrell, of Eben's journeys round the Chesapeake Bay. It is a map of the bay across which a spidery line, indicating Eben's progress, moves, and I was struck by the possibility of adding other lines indicating the movements of the other characters. And this, I believe, is not fancy on my part, but rather is written into the structure of the novel.

The reader has not been told everything and is sometimes as much in the dark as the characters themselves. But irony of this kind is only contributory to the ironic shift by means of which the whole direction of the novel is reversed, and the plot has to sustain two contradictory conclusions simultaneously.

It is left much to the reader to make this irony work. Fielding suggests as much by placing the reader into a dilemma. He draws him into the middle of the action, which then looks free-ranging, unpredictable, open-ended. If the plot is to behave like life, the reader must be unable to see his way before him. But he can only play this game once. On re-reading the novel he knows in advance the answer to all the riddles, the outcome of all the confusions. The plot thus poses questions about how it should be read. Is it impossible to read the book more than once? Or is it necessary to read the book at least twice in order to understand it? On second reading do we reject the first, or are we in some way expected to keep both in mind at once? This last is, I think, the only possibility Fielding leaves open for us, and it is this dual response which secures the ironic structure of the plot.<sup>43</sup>

John Preston's remarks could equally well be applied to The Sot-Weed Factor. Indeed, this double response is a reinforcement of Barth's intent. Not only are we, as readers, aware of the implied contrast between the eighteenth century vision of order and Barth's twentieth

century vision of chaos, induced by the writing of an eighteenth century novel in the latter half of the twentieth century, but also, the 'Swiss precision' of the plotting of which we become aware as we read is vigorously contrasted with the repeated perception of disorder which the characters undergo.

In order to remain abreast of the byzantine movement of the plot, we are more and more drawn into a contract with the author. We come to rely on his good offices and his capacity for concluding the novel in a fashion concomittant with the direction in which it develops - by coming through the labyrinth and thus revealing to us its overriding pattern. For this strategy to succeed, the downfall of the first-person narrator is a necessity. He must be replaced by a new narrator figure, by a guiding hand that stands beyond and above the text as written. Barth's choice of forms refers us, implicitly, to that narrator par excellence - Henry Fielding. For it is with Fielding that the role of the narrator as an omniscient and omnipotent figure in English literature really begins to take shape historically, and it is this figure who comes to play an increasingly important part in the writing of Barth's novels (although I would introduce a distinction, to be expanded later, between on the one hand The Sot-Weed Factor, Giles Goat-Boy, Letters and Sabbatical, and on the other hand Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera).

Barth's 'irrealism' (his term) can be seen as a response to the same problems which confronted the writers and theorists of the nouveau roman, specifically the

rejection of a representational theory of language and its effects on literary form. But it is also a very different response to that of the structuralist critics and the writers of the nouveau roman. Robbe-Grillet's tense and strained efforts to develop a new practice of writing to match this new theory of language; Roland Barthes's demand (expanded and elucidated by others) that we see writing as the difficult and contradictory unfolding of purpose in a text, even that the acts of writing and reading be seen as absolutely in tandem with the development of purpose; Barthes's call for the death of the author (more properly, for the death of the concept of the author as the origin of meaning); all this is rejected by Barth in favour of a concept of the author as benevolent dictator - commanding his text and commanding the reader's responses by the use of a hermetic logic.

This, at least, was the intent. But two elements in The Sot-Weed Factor rupture this project. First, for this process to succeed the text must be absolutely and completely enclosed, and I would argue that The Sot-Weed Factor is not. As we saw earlier, the process of intertextuality is seen by the structuralists as crucial to the socialisation of the text, by breaking the hermetic logic. To an extent, Barth eliminates this by creating his own intertexts - the parodies of the journals - but I have also shown through my analyses of The Bear and John Smith's *General Historie*, that this procedure is not complete (indeed, if we accept the theory of intertextuality, it can never be complete). But more seriously the text escapes this sealing at two points -

one minor and one major. During the description of Eben and Henry Burlingame's journey to Plymouth there is the following passage, "A dusty country lad of twelve or thirteen years, wandering idly down the road, stepped aside and waved at them as they passed".<sup>44</sup> At no other point in the text that I can find is there the appearance of a figure who does not make any contribution to the forward motion of the plot. Indeed, this incident is so much out of keeping with the rest of the narrative movement that it stands out as a mirror-image of its minor nature. Thus, despite Barth's attempt to produce a complete and close-woven text, a thread has worked loose - or has been allowed to work to loose.

More importantly, the epilogue is a total unravelling of the fabric of the novel. Now, it can be said that this is a gesture of the chaotic and disordered vision of the twentieth century, introduced as a contrast to the vision of structure of the eighteenth century, or that it is such a self-conscious process that its presence can be viewed as ironic. But the fact remains that it is present in the text, that the novel collapses into tangled threads despite the author's apparently best efforts to maintain its ordered weave.

As well as this, there is Barth's shock of recognition when he discovered that his novel had been written to a pre-existing pattern. It is this latter point which led Barth to consider the need for an overall pattern which absolutely controlled the movement of the text. In contradistinction to the structuralists, Barth began to accept the possibility of a new creative

literature which stood completely on the rock of a pre-existing pattern. That pattern was the progress of the mythic hero, and Barth's new novel was to be Giles Goat-Boy.

But the action of history , of the world existent beyond the confines of the text being written, destabilised that pattern and fractured the coherence of the allegorical base upon which the book stood. And, as I have already written at the end of chapter five, Giles Goat-Boy acted very much as a conclusion as well as a beginning: the simultaneous birth and completion of a new tradition in the novel. Furthermore, having completed this work - which in retrospect he has described as his least satisfactory <sup>45</sup> - Barth's attention began to shift away from the production of the fabulous and towards an attention on the process of fabulation. Away from the product, and onto the means by which that product is made. That is, away from even the most heavily mediated attempts to bring unruly reality to artistic heel, and towards a form of fiction in which the raw material operated upon was contained by either the boundaries of the individual consciousness or by being the product of previous artistic endeavour. Into an aesthetic in which self-reflexivity is the imperative - if a distinctly unKantian one. The next chapter will address itself to this apparent retreat still further away from the 'real world' and the consequent closer approach to the aesthetics of silence.

Lost in the Funhouse:  
the artist as hero, and  
the 'closed' tendency  
in post-modernist fiction



If, in Giles Goat-Boy, Barth had attempted an encyclopaedic amalgamation of previous novel forms into a sacred book - sacred, that is, in the sense that it absorbed everything and thus strived to be biblical - then it follows logically that this is not a task that can be repeated (at least, not in the same terms). Furthermore, the comprehensive nature of the task which he had attempted in this novel had in some sense exhausted the possibility of revitalising existing narrative forms because, in Barth's eyes and for the reasons outlined in chapter 5, this was a completed exercise. What was needed, then, was the 'colonisation' of new forms of narrative.

There are then internal reasons for the abrupt change that came in Barth's writing after Giles Goat-Boy, for Lost in the Funhouse is a move into a new area - most obviously shown by the differing forms of the two books. But it is also a continuation of the task begun in Giles Goat-Boy. On the one hand, the adaptation of mythic material and the interest in the hero-figure are continued and, on the other, the absorption of narrative forms into the tradition of narrative, which Barth argued is desirable in The Literature of Exhaustion, is also continued. Albeit that this project is conducted in very different terms, given that the forms now taken over are not 'exhausted', it is still a continuation of the underlying motives behind the writing of Giles Goat-Boy.

Before turning to an account of the structure of the pieces contained within Lost in the Funhouse, and of each individual piece, it is worthwhile remarking that the universe of Lost in the Funhouse is very far from that of

Giles Goat-Boy and that this, in itself, is a pointer to a different level of response in Barth, both to history as a whole and to literary history in particular. If Marshall Berman' is broadly correct in his assessment of modernist writing's response to the world being one of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, in the case of Barth that response oscillates between attraction and repulsion. In The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy he attempted to absorb the world around him in a gesture of almost Rabelaisian re-creation. In Lost in the Funhouse history becomes, at most, the history of the isolated individual and the isolated literary form. Within these strictly defined and narrow boundaries, the attention is vigorously focused upon the act of individual (artistic and sexual) creation, until that attention seems to numb creativity to the possibilities of the world beyond itself. Both here and in Chimera, Barth turns away from (even imagined) material and temporal history towards a realm of personal and atemporal re-working of myth. It is a road which, by the end of Chimera, leads to artistic impotence. In this sense, Barth's trajectory demonstrates that even 'high modernism' and 'high post-modernism', with their insistence upon, and declaration of, artistic autonomy depend for their mainspring upon the world beyond.

Lost in the Funhouse is, most obviously, the history of the development of the author from sperm to self-conscious adult. It is also the history of the development of narrative forms from naive linear narrative to the most extrapolated kinds of self-conscious and self-reflexive modernity. It is 'fiction for print, tape, live voice'. It

is an attempt to take on board the ship of narrative the cargo of all narrative media except (*except!*) the visual. From the 'Author's Note', it can be seen that this project evolved more thoroughly as the pieces were composed. Accepting Barth's implied order of composition, the pieces progress from two stories which "take the print medium for granted but lose or gain nothing in oral recitation"<sup>3</sup> to a piece which "makes somewhat separate but equally valid senses in several media"<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, the final piece mentioned in this introductory note, "Frame-Tale", even requires the operation of the visual and tactile senses in order for its position as the epigraph and epitaph, the overarching symbol for the collection, to be grasped (although Barth is, as no doubt we all are, confused about the status of the Moebius strip as a solid object).

What we have, then, in Lost in the Funhouse is an attempt to incorporate contemporary narrative media (and, of course, the oldest narrative medium - the human voice) into the exhausted body of literature; presumably, in an effort to re-vitalise that body. As well as this, the book is the practical recognition and acceptance of his own statement the year before (August 1967) that "art and its forms and techniques live in history and certainly do change"<sup>4</sup>. Barth is not yet ready to cease being one of McLuhan's 'print-oriented bastards' - a course naturally open to him given his previous remarks about the 'used-upness' of literature, but he is prepared to make concessions to McLuhan's favoured arenas of communication.

After the salutary reminder of "Frame-Tale", that this collection is cyclical, to be perceived as a whole -

that whole being the life-cycle - we begin, appropriately enough, with the sperm's journey through the uterus towards the ovum, towards the moment of conception. This point, that the text is to be seen as a progression through the individual tales and also as a whole is emphasised by the technical device which informs the whole of "Night-Sea Journey"; it is a first-person narrative "quoted from beginning to end by the authorial voice"<sup>55</sup>. At this point, the authorial voice controls and surrounds the machinations of the tale: the time has not yet come for the 'modernist' questioning of the status of the author as the source and guarantor of the text. The sperm's "eschatological and other speculations"<sup>56</sup> are, alternatively, trite and merely correct without being stimulating. Indeed, the tale as a whole can be viewed as a progress through the history of philosophy in which all questions regarding the nature of existence are raised.

The result is a brilliant summation of the history of philosophical speculation about ontology. Beyond this point, the sketch is so clear an exposition that comment on the content is mere detraction<sup>7</sup>

So says Jac Tharpe. But to allow that last statement to stand is to deny the business of criticism, not only in the banal sense that all critical comment could be brushed aside as mere detraction, but also because it denies the purpose of criticism - which I take to be an interrogation of the text which lays bare the conclusions and (possibly even more importantly) the premises which order that text. Tharpe's weakness is revealed by the two sentences immediately following those quoted above.

More pertinent is the observation that Barth confines the content to speculation within a limited set of known conditions. whatever the state of the sperm's knowledge the reader knows that since it speaks it lived and met its destined She.<sup>2</sup>

Precisely. Although the tale is told in the present tense, the quotation marks which surround it set it into the past. They are the speculations of a survivor, against which the mute failures have no right of reply. It is this ontology which gives his conclusions an implied validity.

More importantly, the mechanisms by which the debate is confined operate along what can be called (broadly) the existentialist/ nihilist axis allows unanswered and unanswerable questions a validity which is structured not by any preferred answer but by the design of the question itself.

he liked to imagine cycles within cycles, either finite or infinite: for example, the 'night-sea', as it were, in which makers 'swam' and created night-seas and swimmers like ourselves, might be the creation of a larger Maker, Himself one of many, Who in turn et cetera.<sup>2</sup>

The capitalisation here of 'Maker' and the implication that these Makers are unaware of their creation - for who is to say that the swimmers are not Makers in their turn? (Interrupting or extending the procession at one end allows the possibility of interruption or extension at the other). This allows the existence of this possibility but at the same time refuses any means of arriving at an answer. Equivalent procedures are followed repeatedly - does existence have a purpose of which we are unaware?; does a Creator who has concealed his/her existence from us exist? One can do no more than ask these questions once one sets, as Barth sets here, idealist parameters for one's debate, at the same time taking the experience of

the individual as one's yardstick. One might add, parenthetically, that since Descartes's elevation of the category of the Subject to an imperative, idealism has had a case unanswerable within philosophy's own terms. Only by questioning the historical grounds upon which the theories of Descartes and others rise, can one interrogate his arguments. But, in Lost in the Funhouse, the realm of history, even literary history, is almost completely forbidden territory.

Thus Barth returns to his old theorem of pragmatism - of not allowing awareness of such questions to paralyse action. This is the spermatozoa's conclusion in the final paragraph of "Night-Sea Journey". He cannot know whether it is Chance that has brought him to where he is, or whether it is that "only utterest nay-sayers survive the night"<sup>10</sup>, or even whether doubt is the surest proof of faith: all he can do is plunge forward, singing. That is the escape from cosmopsis; and, in the terms of Lost in the Funhouse, actions consist of the telling of fictions. Telling one's doubts, narrating one's questions, is an answer in itself.

The product of the 'I' of "Night-Sea Journey" and She is presumably Ambrose, who recounts the tale of his own naming in "Ambrose, His Mark". This is the next step along the road to consciousness and self-consciousness, for

Naming also refers to the knack of calling things by their names, which requires recognition of them. This ability is that of the man of knowledge and especially of the poet.<sup>11</sup>

Ambrose, the author and therefore the namer of things, tells how he himself was named. Again, the device is shown by its own demonstration.

"Ambrose, His Mark" is the story of the first of three formative incidents in the childhood and adolescence of the purported author, who is, of course, Ambrose Mensch, to whom I will return in my discussion of Letters where he appears as the personification of one possibility in the range of narrative forms presented therein. Here, we have the end of his babyhood, for "As of that Sunday I was weaned not only from her milk but from her care"<sup>12</sup>. This end is also the beginning of the next stage in his life: it is the point at which he moves from being the nameless baby, an infant of indeterminate sex (for he is referred to by both male and female names), a cipher for others and upon whom he is completely dependent for his existence, to being a named child, a male child, a separate individual. The parallels between this and Lacan's account of the importance discourse has in the shaping of the psyche is extraordinary - this indicates, perhaps, a mutual source in Freud's account of differentiation - and marks another of the proximities between Barth's work and that of the structuralists and post-structuralists.

From the earliest pages of this piece, there is a repeated emphasis upon the ritual which should surround the choice of a child's name. Konrad sets the ritual into motion with the following words

The American Indians never named a boy right off. What they did, they watched to find out who he was. They'd look for the right sign to tell them what to call him.<sup>13</sup>

The swarming of the bees on the nursing child is "as clear a naming sign as you could ask for"<sup>14</sup>.

But here confusion as to the meaning of the swarm enters the story, To Konrad it is clear; The Book of Knowledge (the encyclopaedia he sells from door to door) recounts the stories of Plato, Xenophon and Saint Ambrose, upon whom the swarming of bees was a sign that they would have 'a way with words'. Konrad's explanation, then, is that the swarm is an indication that the author will grow into a user of language - the present story is the proof of Konrad's assertion. For Thomas, the explanation is founded on his fund of folk-knowledge which offers the following interpretation of the meaning of the swarm:

"They won't swarm for a naughty man" ... In the old country he declared, couples tested each other's virtue by walking hand in hand among the hives, the chaste having nothing to fear.<sup>15</sup>

Konrad complicates this with his book-learned knowledge of the different interpretations attached to swarming - good fortune, ill fortune, strangers approaching, the death of some one in the family, et cetera. A way with words becomes the uncontested conclusion of the meaning of the sign. But, as we all know, facility with language may be employed for a variety of different moral ends. Further ambiguity is introduced by Grandfather's remarks that "the bees was more on this baby's eyes and ears than on his mouth". Konrad's reply, that "he'll grow up to see things clear"<sup>16</sup>, compounds this ambiguity, for no purpose is attached to this ability to see clearly. Just as talent with language can be employed to various ends, so can his capacity to see. Equally so, the products of these talents



can be interpreted in various ways, opening the route to differing readings of this product of Ambrose's ability, "Ambrose, His Mark".

Another dimension to the naming comes from the giving of a Catholic saint's name to the child of a strongly Protestant, Lutheran family. This signals the divorce of the author from his family situation (and from religion) and, by implication, the divorce of the writer from his social situation which informs much of Lost in the Funhouse. In this way Barth employs 'exhausted' novelistic techniques, like significant names, to construct the reading of the text.

Finally we have the author's own response to the meaning of his name. It is a complex consideration which concludes

As towards one's face, one's body, one's self, one feels complexly toward the name he's called by, which too one had no hand in choosing. It was to be my fate to wonder at that moniker, relish and revile it, ignore it, stare it out of countenance into hieroglyph and gibber, and come finally if not to embrace at least to accept it with the cold neutrality of self-recognition, whose expression is a thin-lipped smile. Vanity frets about his name, Pride vaunts it, Knowledge retches at its sound, Understanding sighs; all live outside it, knowing well that I and my sign are neither one nor quite two. Yet only give it voice: whisper "Ambrose", as at rare times certain people have - see what-all leaves of to answer! Ambrose, Ambrose, Ambrose! Regard that beast, ungraspable, most queer, pricked up in my soul's crannies!<sup>17</sup>

For him, the name is something visited upon him, something other, to which he responds with "the cold neutrality of self-recognition". It is, at this point, accidental (a possibility significantly ignored by all the others involved with the ritual). The author is socialised into acceptance of the name given to him and thus takes the first step into the human world. He has been defined by

others' assessments of himself. But then, in the closing sentences of the piece, the name regains that unambiguous quality attached to it - a facility with words - because Ambrose accepts it as his name. "Ambrose, His Mark" itself is a proof of this expertise.

If the opening sections of Lost in the Funhouse are the account of the author's conception and his first steps on the road to the self-consciousness necessary to the condition of the artist, "Autobiography" can be seen as the first invention of the author as authorial voice engaged in the process of composition rather than commenting upon the conditions of composition. Barth's notes and additional notes at the beginning of the whole make this clearer. "Night-Sea Journey" was meant for either print or recorded authorial voice, but not for live or non-authorial voice". "Ambrose, His Mark" "takes the print medium for granted but loses or gains nothing in oral recitation". "Autobiography" is "for monophonic tape and visible but silent author (in which) the antecedent of the first-person pronoun is not I, but the story speaking for itself. I am its father; its mother in the recording machine"<sup>13</sup>. The author's presence is a necessary part of the work, but equally well the (present) author's silence beyond the existent text is also necessary in order to arrive at the correct perception that "Autobiography" is a text which attempts to challenge the metaphysics of authorship, whereby one individual's conscious mind is the sole source of that work. "Autobiography" is, for the purposes of this example, its own progenitor.

In one sense, "Autobiography" can be seen as the story's complaint at its own appearance - "I don't recall asking to be conceived" - and as a reply to the posited conclusion of the meaning of Ambrose's name in the previous tale - "I haven't a proper name. The one I bear's misleading, if not false. I didn't choose it either"<sup>19</sup>. It is self-consciousness's complaint at being called into existence and his complaint is founded upon the coterminous existence of the self-awareness necessary to produce writing and the non-existence of any experience upon which that awareness can operate. This is, clearly, reminiscent of my earlier commentary on the death of the author and the birth of the text as source of meaning. The piece's content is its own production.

This is a precursor of Ambrose's condition at the beginning of "Water-Message", when he

has grown to grade-school age, possessed of a way with words and much awareness. But these gifts only merit the nickname 'Sissy' and the frustration of knowing there is a great deal he does not know.<sup>20</sup>

Here, however, this situation has been extrapolated to a point where character has become "a mere novel device"<sup>21</sup> the voice speaking from the tape recorder is a self-consciousness that has been abstracted to a level at which language approaches non-referentiality. Further, it is the 'child's vengeance' upon its creator; having been called into existence, it embarrasses its author by continuing itself to the point where it becomes self-reflexive. Its self-consciousness becomes the rationale for the story.

After this venture into the realm of abstract self-reflexivity, the progress of Lost in the Funhouse returns

to the developing self-consciousness set within a recognisable realist frame. The further development of the authorial voice is conditioned by the entrance of new experience. This is signalled by the return to the third-person narrative, by the return of the print medium, and by the continuation of Ambrose's story. The return to Ambrose is both a continuation of the earlier pieces and a reiteration of "Autobiography" (albeit in very different terms); in sum, an addition to the theme of the development of self-consciousness.

What begins as a study of the initiation of the pubescent male into the 'real secret' of the Occult Order of the Sphinx, namely sexuality, ends as a somewhat different order of realisation. Ambrose, on the verge of discovering adolescent sexuality, has already become the differentiated male child which the events of "Ambrose, His Mark" made possible. He has the facility with language which the swarm of bees heralded, but is lacking content for this capacity - precisely because of his lack of experience. The next stage in his development, which is underlined by the early stages of "Water-Message", is an insight into adolescent sexuality. One can only hazard at the precise nature of the rituals of the Occult Order from which Ambrose is excluded but, given that Tommy James and Peggy Robbins have immediately preceded the boys in the Den, they are presumably akin to the masturbation games enacted by the adolescents in Frank Wedekind's Spring Awakening. 'The facts of life' are presented as an sphere of knowledge and understanding from which, as yet, Ambrose is excluded but into which he is on the brink of

entering. Because we, as readers, are excluded from the den along with the young Ambrose we are moved into greater sympathy with the figure of the author, sharing his point of view and his ignorance.

However, his exclusion from the secret rites of the Occult Order leads him to another discovery - that of the message in the bottle. The appearance of the message drives all other thoughts from his mind, and when he opens the sheet of paper it completely commands his attention:

On a top line was penned in deep red ink:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

On the next-to-bottom:

YOURS TRULY

The lines between were blank, as was the space beneath the complimentary close. In a number of places, owing to the coarseness of the paper, the ink spread from the lines in fibrous blots.<sup>23</sup>

His discovery, at the end of the text, is that the materiality of that object which dominates the writer's working existence. This 'text' has neither content nor verifies the existence of the author. It is a sheet of paper - "his mind remarked that those shiny bits in the paper's texture were splinters of wood pulp"<sup>24</sup> - and an empty page. At the end of "Water-Message" Ambrose is still innocent of the knowledge of sexuality but he has discovered a material object onto which he can place the products of his fertile, indeed over-active, imagination. (Ambrose, of course, will return to pondering this sheet of paper and its meaning for him as a writer in Letters). By the end of "Water-Message", Ambrose is equipped with the means to fulfil the vocation visited upon him in "Ambrose, His Mark" and with a burgeoning understanding of that correlative to artistic creation in Barth's work,

sexual creation. But, as yet, the former is overdeveloped in relation to the latter.

The corollary to this is "Petition", in which one is offered a grotesque alternative to the posited filling of Ambrose's page. Just as the water-message begins "To whom it may concern" and concludes "Yours truly", so, too, "Petition" follows the format of a letter. Its status as an interrupted possibility comes from the fact that it is to, and from, a specific individual; it is the enactment of one, particularly grotesque, form of self-consciousness. In the 'Author's Note' Barth is emphatic about its printed form, which strengthens my argument as to its role as a possible but severely limited form of fulfilment.

The clearest injunction which "Petition" presents is the enactment of the consequences of attempting to separate mind from body, for here the author of "Petition" is mind whilst the brother is body. To break the link between them means death for both but equally well their means of connection here is surely a distortion of the posited ideal of mind and body, imagination and experience, united which produces the author. As Tony Tanner writes

the younger brother is like life itself, constantly shrugging off the attempts of language to circumscribe it within particular definitions. Language, in the form of the articulate brother, would be happy to pursue its inclination to ponder its elegant patterings in pure detachment from the soiling contacts of reality. But they are brothers, divided yet related - neither one nor the other.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond this critical writing about Lost in the Funhouse has passed over "Petition" - either in silence or with a

brief aside about its "deeply affecting paranoid energies"<sup>22</sup>. This is, I believe, in part due to a failure of critical imagination. Lost in the Funhouse is clearly not a linear narrative through which one can read, gathering clues about character and thematic structure until one arrives at a conclusion. But equally well it is not a collection of isolated stories, each one of which can be examined in abstraction from the rest. What, then, is the book's structure? It is, as I have indicated earlier, a cyclical pattern - a progression through life and through narrative forms in which the individual life recapitulates the wider pattern of development: phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny in the movement towards a fully articulated self-consciousness. Any historical survey of literature will show that it is not a simple linear movement culminating in the achievements of the present day (or of the nineteenth century!). It contains within itself a series of false starts, cul de sacs, and freaks. "Petition", then, is the combination of these two progressions. It is a tangential fulfilment of a possible narrative form and a possible form of self-consciousness. It stands, not outside the cycle of movement, but as a sealing-off of a possible channel and thus a reinforcement of Barth's argument via refutation.

"Lost in the Funhouse", in its position as the eponymous story of the whole collection, carries expectations which it both fulfils and does not fulfil; that it is, at the very least, close to the core of the

whole book in that it unites a range of concerns that circulate through the whole collection in a fashion which, in its very raggedness and constant disruption of a 'smooth realism', is a new form of narrative.

The story of "Lost in the Funhouse" (in distinction from its plot)<sup>27</sup> is Ambrose's journey to Ocean City during World War 2 on an excursion with his parents, uncle, older brother, and Magda (later to become Peter's wife and already his girlfriend), and Ambrose's encounter with the funhouse. The immediately obvious paucity of this account of "Lost in the Funhouse" is owing to its being one of Barth's most compactly written works. This, in its turn, is an indication of the crucial nature of my earlier distinction between story and plot in this text. Indeed, given the concision of its writing, the story is inordinately imprecise (although this confusion also rests upon an overturning of accepted hierarchies of actual reality and imagined reality as Ambrose compensates for his lack of past experience by producing imaginatively rendered views of the future and of the denouement of the piece).

When one looks closely at the text, one discovers that what is in fact happening is an ellision of two narrative voices which are normally held apart. There is the narrative voice of the story, which incorporates Ambrose's voice (which in turn leads one to suppose that Ambrose is another of the personae which Barth employs as a means of demonstrating the wide range of narrative possibility), and on the other hand, there is the narrative voice of the plot which provides a running



commentary on the progress of the story. "Lost in the Funhouse" is constructed through a progression of 48 paragraphs which underpins (and undermines) the linear progress of the whole story.

This separation between "Lost in the Funhouse" (the text) and 'Lost in the Funhouse' (the story of Ambrose's day in Ocean City) is crucial to the structure of "Lost in the Funhouse" as a whole. 'Lost in the Funhouse' is the story of one day in 19- and moves from the trip to Ocean City, the events of that one day, and concludes with the family's journey homewards. Around this thread is grouped a mass of material extraneous to that story, but necessary to confirm its status as realism; this contains past memories, imaginative projections of the future, socio-historical material, etc.. The text obviously contains the story but it is also constructed out of the laid-bare mechanism which produces the story, comments on the structure of the story, its symbolism and its ramifications. The operation of "Lost in the Funhouse" within and beyond Lost in the Funhouse is, clearly, a fulfilment of Raymond Federman's description of the possibilities of a form of fiction beyond realism:

The writer simply materialises (renders concrete) fiction into words. And as such, there are no limits to the material of fiction - no limits beyond the writer's power of imagination, and beyond the possibilities of language. Everything can be said, and must be said, in any possible way. While pretending to tell the story of his life, or the story of any life, the fiction writer can at the same time tell the story of the story he is telling, the story of the language he is manipulating, the story of the methods he is using, the story of the pencil or the typewriter he is using to write his story, the story of the fiction he is inventing, and even the story of the anguish (or joy, or disgust, or exhilaration) he is feeling while telling his story.<sup>28</sup>

The first four paragraphs of "Lost in the Funhouse" set both the story and the meta-narrative in motion. The story by the presentation of the question which acts as a leitmotif for the whole text, and by the descriptions of the occupants of the car, and of previous trips to Ocean City. The meta-narrative by reference to the role of italicisation as a means of typographical emphasis, to the role of realist devices in the text<sup>29</sup> by an explicit intertextual reference to John Dos Passos's modernist Great American Novel (which further removes this text from the realm of realism) and, finally, by surrounding a description of one small physical action - "she took her left arm from the seat-back to press the dashboard cigar-lighter for Uncle Karl"<sup>30</sup> - with a commentary upon the literary devices employed by writers of fiction. These latter devices include the 'sensual triangulation' which, Barth claims, is commonly used by writers wishing to orient the reader's mind, "perhaps unconsciously", to the scene presented, and also to the role of metaphor in creating orders of significance within a text.

A fine metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech, in addition to its obvious 'first-order' relevance to the thing it describes, will be seen upon reflection to have a second order of significance: it may be drawn from the milieu of the action, for example, or be particularly appropriate to the sensibility of the narrator, even hinting to the reader things of which the narrator is unaware; or it may cast further and subtler lights upon the things it describes, sometimes ironically qualifying the more evident sense of the comparison.<sup>31</sup>

In these first paragraphs, we have the proposition of the use of a range of devices employed by a realist narrative strategy combined simultaneously with the explicit foregrounding of these devices in a manner reminiscent of

modernist strategies. The immediate consequence of this double strategy is that

It obtrudes upon the illusion of reality ... to remind the reader continually of the contrivance of literature, the fact that the story is the semblance of lived-experience, not experience<sup>32</sup>

After another four paragraphs in which the use of the meta-narrative is concealed by an apparently uncritical use of the narrative voice, the next five paragraphs are dominated by the meta-narrative. It is clear from the first of these paragraphs, with its elaboration and explanation of the structure of the tale, that 'Lost in the Funhouse' is not merely the story of Ambrose lost in the funhouse, but it is also the story of the making of that story. If

the function of the *beginning* of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action, expose the background of the situation if necessary, plant motifs and foreshadowings where appropriate, and initiate the first complication or whatever of the 'rising action'<sup>33</sup>

then it is clear that one principal character to whom we have been introduced is the author himself and that he has an ambiguous and complex relationship with Ambrose.

Furthermore, the fact that "at this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever"<sup>34</sup> is not only a foreshadowing of Ambrose's being lost in the funhouse, but also an indication of parallels between the narrator and Ambrose, and the tale and the funhouse - a crucial pair of connections for the symbolic meaning of the text.

It is no coincidence that, just as the text is prefaced with a commentary on artifice and its role in

creating illusions of reality, Fat Mary, the Laughing Lady "who advertised the funhouse" produces mechanical laughter which produces human laughter. Artifice is not artificial; it is a crucial part of the generation of the 'real thing'. The final paragraph asks "what is the story's theme?", but does not, directly, answer the question. Rather, it indicates a correlation between sexual and artistic generation. The correlation is between a gritty realism on both counts, but this is not the correlation which operates directly here. The emphasis is upon a connection between sexual inexperience and the inability to produce a realist text. Magda and Peter are sexually experienced - "They've gone all the way" - and have been to the funhouse before. Ambrose is sexually inexperienced; his only direct encounter being the censored event in the woodshed with Magda when she "purchased clemency at a surprising price set by herself", and will get lost during his first visit to the funhouse (and the author will constantly refer to being lost in his story). Both Ambrose and the author are spermatozoa who have lost their way.

The next seven paragraphs re-emphasise this basic pattern. Ambrose will not go swimming, an act surrounded in the text with sexual innuendo and references to menstruation, as Karl and Peter attempt to drag Magda to the pool. Also, Ambrose cannot walk quickly. In paragraph sixteen Ambrose's limp, his fears about sexuality, and the author's worries about the progress of his text are united typographically and syntactically -

"What are you limping for?" ... Imagine being stung there ...  
How long is this going to take?<sup>35</sup>

This parallel between sexual and artistic creativity is pointed to again in two more symbols, both of which finally indicate the author's inability to produce a realist text: "The diving board would make a suitable literary symbol", he writes instead of plunging in, both sexually and artistically. Ambrose cannot do one and the author cannot do the other: "If you knew your way ...". But Ambrose doesn't and, by implication, the author does not know his way around the funhouse of realism.

The section concludes "Not act; be". Ambrose demonstrates that he cannot act when he doesn't ask Magda about the shed, but instead he becomes the realist for six out of the seven paragraphs. In a traditional realist trick, he escapes from the authorial text - he wanders into an existence which exists both before and after the articulation of the text - and the immediate consequence of this is that he imagines a fictional existence after the end of the articulated text, he imagines conclusions in a world which, ontologically, pre-exists the articulation. But this is, of course, a trick, for no character can exist beyond the boundaries and confines of the text. Thus, the author can drag Ambrose back into the material parameters of the language of the text: "A gets hard when A doesn't want to, and obversely". But it is with A's imagined conclusion to the story of the funhouse - finding a way out in the company of others - closely linked to Ambrose seeing the funhouse operator through a crack in the wall, that the final crucial correlation that controls the rest of the text is indicated; namely, that between the funhouse and the text.

From this point to the end of the text, Ambrose's adventure in the funhouse and the author's adventure of the writing the text interact, reinforcing, undermining and commenting upon each other. This process continues, with the authorial voice acting as a running commentary on both Ambrose in the funhouse and also upon itself in the various houses of fiction, until the point at which Ambrose becomes lost.

At this point Freitag's Triangle intervenes. The purpose of the triangle here is, first, to indicate that the text as a whole has not conformed to the shape of conventional narrative theory but that this section of the text, where story and plot are woven together, does. Thus, it is here that one can expect to find the dramatic climax. It comes when the funhouse operator's daughter transcribes Ambrose's story: - the story she is writing is the story she is hearing, which is Ambrose's story of her writing-down of Ambrose telling the story of her hearing his narrative. It is this complete rupture of realism which is the dramatic climax of "Lost in the Funhouse".

The climax of the story must be its protagonist's discovery of a way to get through the funhouse. But he has found none, may have ceased to search.<sup>36</sup>

There is a crucial separation here between the protagonist and 'he' (i.e. Ambrose). At this point Ambrose is lost in the funhouse but the protagonist (i.e. the author) has found a way to get through, this way being the establishment of a radically anti-realist text. It is a text in which the surface patina has been ruptured, to reveal the construction beneath. But more than that, it is

the dissection of the still-living text in which the method of dissection and the purpose of that which is dissected are coincident. The story develops towards the conclusion that Ambrose is not one of the lovers for whom funhouses are built but rather aspires to being a builder of funhouses, so (given the above-mentioned correlation between sexual and artistic production) the author realises that he cannot produce a realist text but has to write an intensely self-reflective piece. This intensifies the correlation into a correspondence between, on the one hand, unproblematic sexuality and the equally unproblematic relation of the text to reality as expressed in realism and, on the other, various problems of sexuality - impotence, perversion, low fertility rates, etc. - and artistic modes in which the text/reality relation is problematic.

Lost in the Funhouse is both the theory and the practice of a new artistic praxis in which the problematics of writing become the subject matter of writing. The second half of the text goes on to investigate the consequences of this, by developing new narrative methods which move beyond the boundaries of realism. These develop from linear narration, in which the author is the source and organiser of meaning, into non-linear prose, prose densely organised to the point at which syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations operate with equal status. As Morrell indicates, "Lost in the Funhouse" is the point at which Lost in the Funhouse turns from the world of the living to the world of fiction. In terms of the "Frame-Tale", this is the moment at which one moves

from "once upon a time" to "there was a story that began". This movement completes the Moebius strip but also closes off the possibility of the intrusion of extrinsic discourse.

This is clearly represented even in the title, far less the construction, of the next piece, "Echo", which depends upon the understanding of point-of-view for its interpretation. As Morrell puts it:

If Echo is arranging the words and voice of another in order to tell her own story, then the tale is about love and its disastrous consequences. If she is repeating the words and voice of Narcissus then the tale is about self-love and its disasters. If she is repeating the words and voice of Tiresias, then the tale is about cruel knowledge and the burdensome foresight that everything will turn out badly for everyone in the end. Finally, if Echo is repeating the words and voice of Barth, then the viewpoint of Echo, Narcissus and Tiresias are head-spinningly co-existent.<sup>37</sup>

The one possibility ignored by Morrell is the one which is actually the case: that it is all four which are co-existent. Plurality is the operative term, and it is a plurality permitted by the artifice of the text. Because the text exists on the page, it is capable of presenting the four voices simultaneously - a process Barth attempted to reproduce in Help: a stereophonic narrative<sup>38</sup>. But in the latter it is less satisfying because Barth relies upon the translation of the written page onto tape whilst in "Echo" he has succeeded in finding a form capable of multivalent expression and interpretation.

"Echo" also marks the end of narration - as we normally accept the term - in Lost in the Funhouse. With the questions, 'Is Narcissus addressing Tiresias, Tiresias Narcissus?', matters of construction begin to take over as the subject matter of narratives. As the statements and questions of "Two Meditations" indicate, material beyond



the ken of the writing consciousness may suddenly sweep away that consciousness's ability. Everything beyond the workings of the mind is beyond that mind's consciousness. That, it seems to me, is in part the reason for the presence of these two strange passages. But they are also here because they narrate without recourse to the resources of narration. They conclude one form of narration and thus also the presence of the fundamentally different narrative forms of the last five texts. Bad habits cannot be broken slowly; they must be expunged at one fell swoop. And those old bad habits of narration are broken by the production of five prose pieces which explicitly examine the processes of writing. The second half of the book, then, is devoted to turning writing itself into the subject-matter of writing. This releases the author from any responsibility to the conventions of the traditional novel - to the hierarchy of realism whereby the authorial voice assumes a dominant and omniscient role; to plot (in the sense of forward-moving linear narrative); even, as we shall see, to a distinction between poetry and prose.

It is with a vigorous self-understanding that "Title" begins, when it identifies its own position within the text of Lost in the Funhouse and passes comment on what has gone before. The implication, also, of "passionless abstraction" is that "it will get worse". What will get worse is that dilemma which confronts the fictionist at some point; the sense that "Everything's been said already, over and over; I'm as sick of this as you are; there's nothing to say".<sup>33</sup> The point is, of course, that

this sense has been prevalent (as Barth points out in The Literature of Replenishment) since the beginnings of narrative. It may be "the same old story", or even indeed no story at all, which is being told but the act now consists in the telling of it.

The story here is one of the oldest - that of one character's attempt to extricate herself from a relationship - but it is the mechanics of its narration which are crucially new here. Story such as it is, it is almost completely overwhelmed by technical detail about not only the process of creative writing but also by a commentary upon the grammatical construction of the sentence (that basic unit of fiction). That is the purpose of sentences such as:

Why do you suppose it is, she asked, long participial phrase of the breathless variety characteristic of dialogue attributions in nineteenth-century fiction, that literate people such as we talk like characters in a story?<sup>40</sup>

When this becomes the primary motive such 'out-worn' notions as consistent (or even minimal) characterisation become redundant nuisances. Hence the lack of any single name for the two figures. They become Martha or Rosemary, Howard or Edward; or blank. The variant details of plot or character which have, up until now, permitted one to differentiate one work of fiction from another become irrelevant in the face of this "felt ultimacy" that all possible variations of the story have already been told.

When this position is reached, then the only possible route forward is via the strategy outlined in The Literature of Replenishment:

To turn ultimacy against itself to make something new and valid, the essence whereof would be the impossibility of making something new.<sup>41</sup>

But this is, at best, "a nauseating notion", a deflection from facing the possibility of "Silence. General anaesthesia. Self extinction. Silence". Innocent creativity is expelled, to be superceded by the theory and practice that "to acknowledge what I'm doing while I'm doing it is exactly the point"<sup>42</sup>. This is the vertiginous circle of which "Title" consists. To write "I can't write anymore" is simultaneously impossible and possible. And it is this simultaneity which Barth is attempting to achieve in a necessarily linear artistic mode. And does achieve, I would argue, in the splendidly funny sentence

Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness<sup>43</sup>

It is not only funny, but it is an indication of fertile dialectical imagination. Dialectical in the sense that it absolutely rigorously maintains that capacity to hold opposed notions together at the same time. The synthesis may not be transcendent in Hegel's sense of resolving the contradictions within the thesis and the antithesis, but it is a synthesis and exists in that post-structuralist world around which Christopher Morris circles.<sup>44</sup> This is a world in which positions previously considered mutually exclusive co-exist, and a world which does not simplify contradictions by resolving them, but transcends these contradictions by giving them free rein to live side by side. This world, moreover does not distinguish itself from its linguistic constructs but is constituted by those linguistic constructs.

At first sight, the New Critical theoretical universe inhabited by Clayton Koelb's exhaustive analysis of "Glossolalia" is (in theoretical and historical terms) completely opposed to that of the post-structuralist suggestion above. But it is, perhaps, merely proof of Barth's capacity to maintain simultaneity that "Title" and "Glossolalia" are adjacent in Lost in the Funhouse.

In "Glossolalia", Barth's strategy of disrupting the rhetoric and discourse of prose fiction is maintained. But his tactics are vastly different because, as Koelb writes, "one of the most fundamental distinctions in literary criticism is the one between poetry and prose"<sup>45</sup>. Yet his tentative conclusion is that "Glossolalia" achieves "the possibility of a third category". Let us accept briefly Koelb's assertion that the crucial distinction between verse and prose is in the presence or absence of metre. But then Koelb immediately demolishes his own position by allowing for the existence of non-metrical verse and , in "Glossolalia", the existence of metrical prose. Having done this, however, he does not have the courage of his convictions which would allow him to make explicit the untenable nature of his original distinction. Rather, he retreats into a detailed analysis of "Glossolalia" as

a complex and highly structured piece of prose, an elegant tale of catastrophic composed  $\chi\alpha\rho\alpha\ \omega\mu\pi\omega\omega\gamma\upsilon$ <sup>46</sup>

That is, a detailed analysis based upon the precepts of classical scholarship (and he makes the comparison to Pindar explicit).

Beyond that, he offers no information that could not be gleaned from Barth's "additional author's notes", which

tell us the identities of the six narrators and that the passages are metrically identical and based upon the Lord's Prayer as in Matthew vi 9-13 -

Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors. And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

- and that "their audiences don't understand what they're talking about"<sup>47</sup>. This last point is most clear in the first paragraph, narrated as it is by Cassandra and, even if the identity becomes less immediately apparent as the first four paragraphs pass, it is still possible to identify the speakers as figures from Greek, Christian and Hebrew mythology. It is in the fifth passage that the reader's difficulties become insurmountable. The author is "an unidentified psalmist" speaking in "the Martian language".

The final passage, spoken by the authorial voice, acts as a summation of all that has gone before and then provides a critical commentary on the individual passages. There are a number of things to say about this. First, that

The insufferability of the fiction, once this correspondence is recognised, makes this double point: that language may be a compound code, and that the discovery of an enormous complexity beneath a simple surface may well be more dismaying than delightful.<sup>48</sup>

Secondly, that Glaser-Wohrer is wrong when she writes that Barth

Aside from drawing the reader's attention to aspects that lie behind the straight story line, Barth in "Glossolalia" might also be poking fun at the structuralists' search for an

underlying common system of literature when he composes artificially a unifying principle in this piece of fiction<sup>49</sup>

Wrong, because Barth is anticipating precisely the objection that Roland Barthes raises in S/Z when he begins

to see all the world's stories within a single structure: ... a task as exhausting as it is ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference ... a difference which does not stop and which is articulated upon an infinity of texts, of languages, of systems: a difference of which the text is the return.<sup>50</sup>

It is not, he argues, a choice between the scientificity of 'high structuralism's' imposition of unifying order and the 'reader's spontaneous reaction'. Rather, it is a question of adapting structuralism's purpose to the discovery of difference, of turning its techniques away from the unveiling of equivalence. It is, also, by now commonplace to argue that this text marks the break from structuralism to post-structuralism: a point which throws light on to the prescience of "Glossolalia". Part of the philosophical project of the post-structuralist writings of Jacques Derrida is the critique of 'the metaphysics of presence'<sup>51</sup>, of a transcendentalism in which a speaking presence is implied behind the written text. Barth's prescience consists in the simultaneous insistence upon the speaking presence - "Glossolalia will make no sense unless heard in live or recorded voices"<sup>52</sup> - and its actual absence from the text as presented in the volume Lost in the Funhouse. The reader, as opposed to the listener, is invited to make sense of a text which, unless heard, is incomprehensible.

But it is in the text, and not in its performance, that we are offered the clue whereby we may unravel the

enormous complexity of what is on the surface nonsense - the name of Mme. Alice Lebaron in the additional author's notes. And then, "the senselessest babble, could we ken it, might disclose a dark message, or prayer"<sup>53</sup>. That unravelling may be the dismaying discovery of a dark message or the delightful finding of a prayer, but we are invited to search the text for it, no matter what its final import may be. This is an archetypal image of the 'metaphysics of presence' and of the way in which Derrida conceives western language as operating with the myth of immanent meaning.

From "Glossolalia", we are invited onward to a text which has no ostensible content beyond the technique of writing. At no point does "Life-Story" offer us any unselfconscious transference of subject matter into content; that process of turning action into language is always explicitly revealed. The real world and its history become a series of metaphors for writerly difficulties and speculations. The world here is of the same circumference as that which Barth described when he wrote of producing

novels which imitate the form of the novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author ... In fact such works are no more removed from life than Richardson's or Goethe's epistolary novels are: both imitate 'real' documents, and the subjects of both, ultimately, is life, not the documents. A novel as much as a piece of the real world as a letter.<sup>54</sup>

But it is an enormously more complex world in which characters not only change names at will, but also acquire variant ontological status within the process of fictionalising.

The ostensible content of "Life-Story" is as follows. J.B. settles down to write a fiction at 9:00am on Monday,

20th June 1966 and ponders the nature of fiction until a little past midnight when his wife enters the room to wish him happy birthday. En route through these fifteen hours of composition J.B. encounters virtually all of the aesthetic, epistemological and ontological questions concerning the writing of fiction.

He also, incidentally, only writes one line of his fiction - it is a line from the previous piece "Glossolalia" and is drawn from the section of 'Martian language' therein. Thus, we are in a linguistic universe sealed off from any simple, realist relation to the real world and engaging only with the making of prose. At the same time, of course, he writes the whole of "Life-Story": that is, one's attention is directed not to the final product but to the process of writing. This involves a constantly shifting sense of his own position within the text. Is he author or character, a real person or fictional? (This is, of course reminiscent of the sperm's musings in "Night-Sea Journey"). This concern rapidly becomes part of the actual content of the text and is absorbed as identifiable characters lose their names and their stability. Thus, D begins as hero and also author of the story of E (who is in turn writing a fiction). He then becomes the hero of C's story (the story of D writing the story of E writing a story). In turn C becomes the hero of B's story and the linear progression is pushed backwards one more step. B then begins to ponder whether he, too, might not be a fictional product.



He is, of course. He is a character in J.B.'s fiction. B's story then becomes a debate with B\_, who advises

I would advise in addition the eschewal of overt and self-conscious discussion of the narrative process. I would advise in addition the eschewal of overt and self-conscious discussion of the narrative process.

The cycle breaks down when G interrupts to present his claim

I want to be in a rousing good yarn as they say, not some piece of avant-garde preciousness. I want passion and bravura action in my plot, heroes I can admire, heroines I can love, memorable speeches, colorful accessory characters, poetical language. It doesn't matter to me how naively linear the anecdote is; never mind modernity!<sup>55</sup>

G then accuses J(B) of being reactionary for authoring self-conscious fiction. X then becomes C at the point of deciding to start his fiction again, and Y becomes B at the point his wife walked in and provoked the writing of the one line of fiction that exists beyond this text - the line from "Glossolalia". This is also a sexual provocation, recalling again the parallels between the two forms of creativity. In the last two paragraphs eight new characters are introduced - T,U,V,K,L,M,N,O - who then play variations on the already established tune.

If one arranges these letters not in a linear pattern but in a zig-zag fashion thus

C	E	K	M	O	U	X	B	
B	D	G	L	N	T	V	Y	J

then the only way the necessary connection can be made which turns this sequence into a self-contained unit is by projecting it onto a Moebius strip - which would connect B

to B - the image of infinity with which the whole book begins. Also, the ontological doubts which have been raised about fictionality mean that the motion is two-directional. Characters become both authors and other authors' fictions. If this seems a little tenuous, my reply would be that, for Barth, arranging letters is, in certain ways, what his fiction is all about and that there is a long history of numerological and cryptological literature.

In the next section the urge to be un-self-conscious again breaks down before the sheer pressures of technique.

Having

resolved this time to eschew overt and self-conscious discussion of his narrative process and to recount instead in the straightforwardest manner possible the several complications of his character's conviction that he was a character in a work of fiction, arranging them into dramatically ascending stages if he could for his reader's sake and leading them (the stages) to an exciting climax and denouement if he could.<sup>66</sup>

B is completely locked back into the cycle of turning technique into content. The further complication now introduced is the possible disruption of the linear progression teller-tale-told. But at the same time, the fact that we are reading "Life-Story" means that we, too, are locked into that linear cycle. How can we discover the possibilities of this non-linear progression without being participants in a linear progression? Neither we nor the author can escape these terms for, by attempting to refuse them, we are, if only negatively, contained within them. They are the operative terms by which we become capable of understanding literature. As Derrida has pointed out in another context, simply to deny a term is not to deny it;

it must be replaced by another set of positive and negative terms. Literature is trapped within a definite set of positive and negative terms, from which it cannot escape without ceasing to be literature. It is within this nexus that the characters and narrators of "Life-Story" are ceaselessly turning.

If one regarded the absence of a ground-situation, more accurately the protagonist's anguish at that absence and his vain endeavours to supply the defect, as itself a sort of absence of ground-situation, did his life-story thereby take on a kind of meaning? A "dramatic" sort he supposed, though of so sophisticated a character as more likely to annoy than to engage.<sup>56</sup>

The third section begins with a re-iteration of all that has gone before, through a direct address to the reader (who is condemned by reference to Marshall McLuhan's famous definition of readers of fiction). This is, however, immediately revealed as in fact the author adopting the role of an author exasperatedly addressing a posited reader. This process of rhetoric creating both the 'author' and the 'reader' as characters in a fiction, who are then themselves revealed as potential creators of rhetoric who create; etc... this process operates as a (potentially) infinite regression in the text until we reach the following

To what conclusion will he come? He'd been about to append to his own tale inasmuch as the old analogy between Author and God, novel and world, can no longer be employed unless deliberately as a false analogy, certain things follow: 1) fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity or 2) choose to ignore the question of deny its relevance or 3) establish some other, acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader. Just as he finished doing so however his real wife and imaginary mistress entered his study; "It's a little past midnight" she announced with a smile; "do you know what that means?"<sup>57</sup>

This is a summation of the text's practical rejection of the author/reader contexts which operate in un-self-

conscious fiction. This rejection is seen at work and then presented explicitly.

What follows from this is an almost essayistic statement of the text's conclusions, a statement in which grammatical and syntactic structure seem to be simultaneously presenting and withdrawing positions in an enormously vertiginous whirl. The escape from this is arbitrary. When the 21st June arrives, it is the author's birthday and his wife enters to kiss him, thus obscuring the end of the sentence he is writing. 'Reality' intrudes and the text, as we have seen, concludes with one of Barth's favourite metaphorical confluences of sex and artistic endeavour. The author, locked into an endless, because spiralling, text "caps his pen". Of course, though, the choice of 21st June is not arbitrary. It is the date on which Todd Andrews decided to kill himself and thus set in motion the writing career of John Barth!

The penultimate tale of Lost in the Funhouse, "Menelaiad", is the most technically complicated of all these individual texts. It has two simultaneously operating designs. Most obviously, there is the 'Chinese box' construction in which seven tales are inserted into each other and placed within the overall narrative structure of Menelaus's voice speaking on the beach. Thus, at what many critics (including Jan Marta and Jac Tharpe) have identified as the heart of the whole piece - namely the point at which Helen answers "'''''' Love!'''''''''' - Menelaus receives the answer to a question which is asked within the tale of himself and Helen of Troy, which is recounted in the tale of Menelaus and Eidothea, which is

told to Proteus on the beach, the story of which he is telling to Helen on the ship, the account of which he is relating to Telemachus several years later, which is itself enclosed within the account of How Menelaus Became Immortal, which is the narrative being related by the voice of Menelaus on the beach. This almost impossibly difficult technical structure is reproduced in the text by the varying degrees to which sentences, words and phrases are enclosed by batteries of quotation marks. This reaches its height of complication at the point at which a single question is asked simultaneously in several of the tales. It is reproduced thus

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" "" "" "" " "" ""
" "" " ( " " ) " " "
" "" " ( Why? ) " "
" " ( " ) "
" "" "" " "" ""

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As Barth has written, half-ironically, "Menelaid depends for clarity on the reader's eye"<sup>60</sup>. Half-ironically, because the only possibility of making any sense at all of the text's structure lies in its visual reproduction.

At the same time as this labyrinth is in operation, a second structuring device is at work; the linear revelation and counter-revelation of identity and, thus, of reality. This is best demonstrated by the operation of the device of speculation on Proteus's status -

If Proteus once was Old Man of the Sea and now Proteus was a tree, then Proteus was neither, only Proteus; what I held were dreams. But if a real Old Man of the Sea had really been succeeded by real water and the rest, then the dream was Proteus.<sup>61</sup>

This concludes

When I understood that Proteus somewhere on the beach became Menelaus holding the Old Man of the Sea, Menelaus ceased. Then I understood further how Proteus thus also was as such no more, being as possibly Menelaus's attempt to hold him, the tale of that of that vain attempt, the voice that tells it.<sup>62</sup>

Proteus has become Menelaus, and then made him imagine all that happens after Menelaus seized Proteus whilst Proteus has in fact escaped to cuckold Menelaus. At this point Menelaus's body collapses and all that is left is "Proteus's terrifying last disguise", the voice of Menelaus endlessly recounting the tale. This seems, in retrospect, an extremely elaborate joke about the metaphysics of presence in which the speaking voice has been privileged over the body upon which its presence would normally seem to be predicated.

It is re-inforced by Barth's adaptation of Euripides's Helen, wherein Euripides presents a comic version of what is more usually regarded as the subject-matter of tragedy, by having Helen deny she was ever at Troy and insist that she has, indeed, spent the whole period of the Trojan war in Egypt at the tomb of Proteus.

"'Doubt no more" said Helen. "Your wife was never in Troy. Out of love for you I left you when you left, but before Paris could up-end me, Hermes whisked me on father's orders to Egyptian Proteus and made a Helen out of clouds to take my place".<sup>63</sup>

Menelaus's refusal to accept this account engenders several possibilities, all of which cast doubt upon the role of identity (and thus on the unproblematic relation between individual self and reality): this Helen maintains that the Helen at Troy was a cloud-figure; in order to allow this latter Helen (the 'real' one) to continue her

cuckolding of Menelaus, and the former (speaking) Helen is in fact the cloud-figure; or that the Menelaus who seized Proteus on the beach at Pharos, and thus achieved understanding, is in fact a cloud-figure whilst the real Menelaus remains lost.

Whatever the case may be, these doubts cast on the status of identity are part and parcel of the complex structure of the story. The insecurity of identity calls into question the self's ability to comprehend accurately an external reality. The specific form this takes in Barth's work here is the author's position in relation to a textual product and the allowance of the possibility that the author is himself a character in a greater fiction. "Night-Sea Journey" and "Life-Story" are clear examples of this, but perhaps the clearest rendering of this problem is to be found in a work of one of those writers for whom Barth has the greatest respect, namely The Circular Ruins by Jorge Luis Borges.

Menelaus, then, is hurled into a world of endless contradictions and shifting guises in which a sure knowledge of reality becomes completely lost. And the reader is carried with him into narrative structures so entangled that such apparent nonsenses as:

" " 'Got you!' I cried' I cried' I cried" I cry. "'My companions, when I hollered, grabbed hold too: one snatched his beard, one his hands, one his long white hair; I tackled his legs and held fast. First he changed into a lion, ate the beard-man , what a mess; then snake, bit the hair-chap, who'd nothing to hold onto"'<sup>64</sup>

" " " " " Why" I repeated, " I repeated, ' I repeated, " I repeated, ' I repeated, " I repeat. " " " " "And the woman, with a bride-shy smile and hushed voice, replied: 'Why what?'"<sup>65</sup>

make sense. For the same question is asked simultaneously by so many voices that an answer is virtually impossible, because that question engenders a range of answers according to the context in which it is asked. This is Barth's attempt to reproduce polyphony on the page, whilst at the same time joining character, reader and author together in a world of radical unsureness.

This is the meaning created by structure in this text and it is a meaning not simply explicated by but actually (necessarily) built into the design of the tale. However, I would argue, this is not all the meaning that we can extract from "Menelaiad". If we examine the *substantial* content of "Menelaiad", we discover a figure searching through the myriad complexities of reality for motivation. In Barth's own words

Menelaus on at the beach at Pharos ... illustrates a positive artistic morality in the literature of exhaustion. He is not there, after all, for kicks ...: Menelaus is lost, in the larger labyrinth of the world, and has got to hold fast while the Old Man of the Sea exhausts reality's frightening guises so that he may extort direction from him when Proteus returns to his 'true' self. It's a heroic enterprise, with salvation as its object.<sup>66</sup>

Hence, at the 'heart' of "Menelaiad" Menelaus asks

""""""Why'd you wed me?"""""" and receives the answer

""""""Love!""""""<sup>67</sup>. Whatever doubts may be cast upon

Helen's reply by Paris - """"""Consult our oracle' and by

Odysseus it still remains at the centre of the piece.

Furthermore, Proteus's "last terrifying disguise" is a voice re-iterating "the absurd, unending possibility of love"<sup>68</sup>. This identification of love as the root of

salvation is enhanced by Proteus's claim that """"Not

Athena, but Aphrodite is your besetter""""<sup>69</sup>; enhanced,



because love becomes both source and solution for problems, that is, it becomes a force enclosing the motion of the world. Certainly, William J. Krier<sup>70</sup> sees this as a continuation of, and extrapolation from, Barth's oft-made comparison between artistic and sexual activity - "Menelaus discovers the necessity of love for his survival"<sup>71</sup>. He extends this still further until it becomes a metaphor for reading

Love between a story listened and Menelaus, metaphorically comparable to the love which exists between 'Menelaus' and Helen, will make Menelaus real. But the reader of this story must be willing to pass Helen's test, to distinguish between Menelaus, the storyteller, and 'Menelaus', the character in the tale itself. ... Menelaus survives outside of his story, then, by relying upon the discovery made within his story that a distinction can be made between the literal story and the act of storytelling. As he himself makes this distinction, he parallels the author-character in 'Life-Story' using an act of self-consciousness, his awareness of himself as potentially distinct from his story, to survive.<sup>72</sup>

Thus far, I am sure the argument is correct, but to see the "absurd, unending possibility of love" as an uncomplicated affirmation (albeit a tenuous one), as Harold Farwell does<sup>73</sup>, is, it seems to me, incorrect. This is because, in a text dominated structurally, thematically and even typographically, by a concern for the difficulties and nigh-impossibilities of narrative craft, a question relating directly to those problems is left unanswered. Peisistratus asks two questions "to do with mannered rhetoric and your shift of narrative viewpoint"<sup>74</sup>. He is both questioning the technique of "Menelaiad", the materials out of which "Menelaiad" is made. For these questions to receive no overt answer implies, surely, that no uncomplicated affirmation can be made. All is uncertainty. This is the cleft stick in which

Barth's writing is caught during much of this book. On the one hand wishing to identify a positive force as a bulwark against the shifting sands of uncertainty, but on the other hand having to construct that positive force on precisely those shifting sands.

"Anonymiad", the final text, operates as a bathetic conclusion to "Menelaiad". The narrator, formerly Menelaus, becomes anonymous and Helen, formerly the Helen of Homer and Euripides, becomes a she-goat. The situation of this piece comes from Robert Graves' Greek Myths, who summarises the material which acts as the basis for "Anonymiad" thus

Agamemnon, ... had instructed his court bard to keep close watch on her (Clytemnestra) and report to him, in writing, the least sign of infidelity. But Aegisthus seized the old minstrel and marooned him without food on a lonely island, where birds of prey were soon picking his bones.<sup>75</sup>

Barth, employing a manner which reaches back to The Sot-Weed Factor, renders the myth in typically bawdy fashion. But what is of greatly more importance is that "Anonymiad" is the *writing-down* of the story of the writing of "Anonymiad".

Marooned, and thus isolated from the possibility of experience (which is seen by Aegisthus and others as the essential source of creativity), the anonymous bard's attention turns to the question of how he would narrate his own story. Thus, although the text follows the nine-part structure which the narrator set for himself -

What I had in mind was an Anonymiad in nine parts, reflecting (so you were to've nudged your neighbour and observed) the nine amphorae and ditto muses; or seven parts plus head- and tail-piece: the years of my maroonment framed by its causes and prognosis. The prologue was to've established, hopefully has done, the ground-conceit and the narrative voice and viewpoint:

a minstrel stuck on some Aegean clinker commences his story, in the process characterising himself and hinting at the circumstances leading to his plight. Parts One through Four were to rehearse those circumstances, Five through Seven the stages of his island life vis-a-vis his minstrelling - innocent garrulity, numb silence, and terse self-knowledge, respectively - and fetch the narrative's present time up to the narrator's. The epilogue's a sort of envoi to whatever eyes, against all odds, may one day read it.<sup>76</sup>

It becomes, not simply the telling of the tale, but the passing of a comment upon, and a demonstration of, the intended text. Thus, in the words of Jac Tharpe,

Part One-and-One-Half quotes from an unfinished Part One; and, to compensate, Part Three is omitted, presumably because the artist had nearly run out of space and so put a tailpiece on to the tail of Part One. Thus, Part One-and-One-Half summarises the uncomposed Part One. Part Two opens with an opening to Part Two about Part Two. The text of Part Two combines retelling and recounting Part Three, in a hopeless attempt to "get to where I am". Part Three becomes one of the blanks of Title and of the water message, though already existent in Part Two, which Part One-and-One-Half has replaced.<sup>77</sup>

It is, then, a technically complex text; and a text in which these complications permit the construction of a post-modernist text. That is, a text in which the method of artistic construction is laid bare at the same time as the basic concerns of post-modernism are revealed as central.

And here, Barth seems to be claiming a heritage for post-modernism which reaches back into the depths of the history of literature.

the want of any audience but asphodel, goat, and tern played its part after all in the despairs that threatened me: a man sings better to himself if he can imagine someone's listening. In time therefore I devised solutions to both problems. Artist though, I'd been wont since boyhood when pissing on beach or bank to make designs and clever symbols with my water. From this source, as from Pegasus's idle hooftap on Mount Helicon, sprang now a torrent of inspiration: using tanned skins in place of a sand-beach, a seagull-feather for my tool, and a mixture of wine, blood, and squid-ink for a medium, I developed a kind of coded markings to record the utterance of mind and heart. By drawing out these chains of symbols I could so preserve and display my tale, it was unnecessary to remember it. I could therefore

compose more and faster; I came largely to exchange song for written speech, and when the gods vouchsafed me a further great idea, that of launching my products worldward in the empty amphorae, they loosed from my damned soul a Deucalion-flood of literature.<sup>78</sup>

At the breaking point from oral to written literature, the anonymous narrator wonders, in a vein similar to that of The Literature of Replenishment, "Was there any new thing to say, any new way to say the old?"<sup>79</sup> This is the same dilemma which Barth sees in one of the earliest of all written texts (from at least 2,000B.C.) which, he recalls, bemoans that there is no new material in the world left to write about.

But the answer is simple, and it is the generative force behind all fiction:

I found that by pretending that things had happened which in fact had not, and that people existed who didn't, I could achieve a lovely truth which actually obscures - especially when I learned to abandon myth and pattern my fabrications on actual people and events: Menelaus, Helen, the Trojan War. It was as if there was this minstrel and this milkmaid, et cetera; one could I believe draw a whole philosophy from that *as if*.<sup>80</sup>

Here, then, are the two major strategic thrusts of post-modernism . On the one hand, the scrupulous attention to the mechanics whereby texts are produced until those mechanics become the stuff of literature. And on the other hand, the escape from the demands of realism into the realm of the fabulous. This realisation has been there in Barth's work for some time previous to this moment , but it this moment of articulation in a text that might be said to move him definitely into the realm of post-modernism. Because, of course, the technical description must come within a text before it can be counted post-

modernist. It is the combination of the two elements which makes post-modernism post-modernist.

Beyond this, the conclusion of "Anonymiad" acts as a conclusion for the whole of Lost in the Funhouse and, indeed, stands as Barth's comment on the place of literature both within the myth of the marooned anonymous narrator and also on McLuhan's condemnation of 'print-oriented bastards'.

There, my tale's afloat. I like to imagine it drifting age after age, while the generations fight, sing, love, expire. Now, perhaps, it bumps the very wharfpiles of Mycenae, where my fatal voyage began. Now it passes a hairsbreadth from the unknown man or woman to whose heart, of all hearts in the world, it could speak fluentest, most balmy - but they're too pre-occupied to reach out to it, and it can't reach out to them. It drifts away, past Hercules's pillars, across Oceanus, nudged by great and little fishes, under strange constellations bobbing, bobbing. Towns and statues fall, gods come and go, new worlds swim into light, old perish. Then too it must perish, with all things deciphered and undeciphered: men and women, stars and sky.<sup>81</sup>

In the continuing debate on the 'death of the novel', this is the writer's pessimistic conclusion; that his writings go unread, passing by those to whom they could be of use. But there is also the direct address to the reader;

I have no doubt by the time any translating eyes fall on it I'll be dust, along with Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Agamemnon ... and Merope, if that as your name, if I haven't invented you as myself. I could do well by you now, my sweet, to whom this and all its predecessors are a continuing, strange love letter. I wish you were here. The water's fine; in the intervals of this composition I've taught myself to swim, and if some night your voice recalls me, by a new name, I'll commit myself to it, paddling and resting, drifting like my amphorae, to attain you or to drown.<sup>82</sup>

This position is optimistic primarily because the sentence has been read. And if it has been read, then the possibility of a love-relationship between author and reader exists. That is, surely, one of the main

undercurrents of Lost in the Funhouse - the author's search for sufficient readers.

The final way in which "Anonymiad" acts as a summation of Lost in the Funhouse is through the image of the writer filling amphorae with different forms of literature

Thus I found the strength to fill up two more amphorae: the seventh with long prose fictions of the realistical, the romantical, and the fantastical kind, the eighth with comic histories of my spirit, such as its little victories, defeats, insights, blindnesses, et cetera as I deemed might have impersonal resonance or pertinence to the world.<sup>33</sup>

This clearly refers to the way in which Lost in the Funhouse is the gathering together of fictional manners into an encyclopaedia of writing. A text which is, as I suggested at the beginning of the chapter, a personal history of the development of literature and the authorial figure concludes with a man producing not only different modes in different vessels (surely a reference to Barth's own corpus) but also a fiction about the writing of fiction (equally surely a reference to Barth's manner in Lost in the Funhouse and later in Chimera).

It remains, then, to pass comment on the whole of Lost in the Funhouse. As Barth writes in the "Author's Note"

This book differs in two ways from most volumes of short fiction. First, it's neither a collection nor a selection, but a series; though several of its items have appeared separately in periodicals, the series will be seen to have been meant to be received "all at once" and as here arranged.<sup>34</sup>

From this it is clear that the intention was to produce a unified text. Jac Tharpe (among others) has demonstrated

the way in which a series of themes and symbols bind the stories together.

Linguistic motifs link the stories and the stages of the youth's development. The phrase 'vessel and contents' of Night-Sea Journey suggests the idea of form and content, while also being a sexual metaphor. It also suggests the bottle that Ambrose finds and the jugs of wine that 'inspired' the writer of Anonymiad. The narrator of Night-Sea Journey is also 'tale-bearer of a generation' ... 'Mid-point' recalls the Moebius strip which has no mid-point and the numerous other references to beginning, middle and end, whether the references are to history or story.<sup>85</sup>

Of all these devices perhaps the most telling is the use of the Moebius strip, in which rectitude and infinity are inextricably connected. The strip tells us that on reaching the 'end' (at the word "began") we must begin to read again (at the word "once"). A second reading is both repetition and movement forward. Let us remember that that other great encyclopaedia of literary forms in English (Finnegans Wake) concludes with the definite article, inviting us to begin again - "poor old Michael Finnegan, begin agen". The Moebius strip is also crucial in that in its resolution of two places into one through the twist of the circle, it produces an image of the central aesthetic problem of the whole text. Reality and fiction, in the realms of realism, are opposites: the former is the progenitor of the latter. But, in the strip and in the structure of Lost in the Funhouse, the two have been resolved into one. Autobiography becomes fiction, fiction precedes reality, the production of fiction becomes the subject matter of fiction received. Ontological hierarchies are disturbed and this disturbance signals a further position; with what aesthetic are we to replace the exhausted mode against which John Barth directs the series

of attacks in his contemporary essay, The Literature of Exhaustion? In many ways Lost in the Funhouse can be seen as an attempt to answer this question.

What is rejected most clearly in this conspectus of narrative forms is the unmediated (and unregenerate) modes of realism in all their varieties. They are replaced by a manner of writing which can be loosely gathered together by its various employments of the technical devices of self-reference, replaced by a text whose praxis rests upon the premises of modernism. Indeed, it is a text which goes very close, on occasions, to the outermost limits of modernism in its use of introversion and exposure of the mechanisms of writing. But, crucially, it never definitely crosses those limits into an arena where the text supervents the reality to which it is bound. The two are inseparably linked (that is part of the meaning of the Moebius strip). And "Two Meditations", or at least its intentions, constantly resonate through the text. Reality goes on existing, and the author's task is to find a mode of writing which is neither naive realism nor the blank of silence - the road down which, as Ihab Hassan<sup>33</sup> has suggested, many postmodernists have gone.

This continuing articulation springs from an impulse taken from the high-priests of modernism, namely, the employment of myth as a source of meaning. But it is also here that John Barth most clearly differentiates himself from the modernists, for his employment of myth is very far from theirs. Writing of Pynchon, Anne Mangel claims that



by building his fiction on the concept of entropy, or disorder, and by flaunting the irrelevancy, redundancy, disorganisation, and waste involved in language, Pynchon radically separates himself from earlier 20th century writers, like Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce. Thinking of literature in terms of order, rather than disorder, they saw art as perhaps the last way to impose order on a chaotic world. Yet the complex, symbolic structures they created to encircle chaotic experience often resulted in the kinds of static, closed systems Pynchon is so wary of.<sup>27</sup>

And, one could add, resonant with meaning in a fashion Barth would be wary of because he employs parody by humanising mythic figures - "parody, as 18th century precursor of modernist introversion"<sup>28</sup> - as a source of comedy in "Menelaiad" and "Anonymiad". Thus, they become sources of meaning by becoming precursors of the radical uncertainty which afflicts so many of John Barth's characters.

At the same time, mythical material becomes a means which Barth tests as a possible source for the regeneration of literature. In The Literature of Exhaustion, he expounds a means through which literature does not have to surrender to the claims of those who were prepared to say that they had heard its death rattle. In Lost in the Funhouse, he demonstrates that thesis at work. As Jan Marta has it

Lost in the Funhouse, then, regenerates literature through genre modification, structural innovation, and at the thematic level through the union of fiction and reality, or art and love, of autonomy (Modernism) and mimesis (19th century Realism). Moreover, it gives literature new life by revitalising the literary medium.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, Barth becomes a post-modernist in his (comic, parodic and bathetic) regeneration of the mythic impulses of the modernists. With that in mind, and also remembering his 1979 remark that "one day I realised to my delight (I'm an opposite sex twin) that all my books come in

pairs" <sup>so</sup>), it should come as no surprise that in his next book, Chimera, this process was continued.

Chimera:

the artist-hero as imitator

After the three prolific years of 1966-68, which culminated with the publication of Lost in the Funhouse, Barth began work on a much longer work called, variously, The Amateur, The Seeker, Letters. However, this project, by the early 1970's

seemed anyway to have become a vast morass of plans, notes, false starts, in which I grew more mired with every attempt to extricate myself.<sup>1</sup>

And it was set aside in favour of a work based on the notes he had been making for some time on the myth of Perseus. However, this, too

metamorphosed into quicksand, not before much good spiritual money had been thrown after the bad. Followed my first real affliction by the celebrated ailment Writers Block, a malady from which, in the hubris of my twenties and thirties, I had fancied myself immune; I examined it as one might a malignant growth, with sharp interest and dull fright. For a long time I could not understand it - though I did come to understand, to the heart, the lamentations of those mystics to whom Grace had been once vouchsafed and then withdrawn. To the world it is a small matter, rightly, whether any particular artist finds his powers sustained or drained from one year to the next; to the artist himself, however minor his talent, imaginative potency is as crucial to the daily life of his spirit as sexual potency - to which, in the male at least, is an analogue as irresistible as that of Grace, and as dangerous.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually Barth came to understand the nature of his difficulty and began to write again:

What I composed is another story, of no concern to us here; I recount this little personal episode by way of introducing this afternoon's lecture.<sup>3</sup>

I have begun this chapter on Chimera in this fashion not so much because I hold any particular brief for the intrinsic usefulness of biographical information in literary criticism, but because the material quoted above comes directly from the story which Barth wrote as a means of breaking out of his writer's block and is, therefore,

exemplary of the method employed throughout Chimera. In various specific ways, the technique of the book as a whole is the employment of the problems of creativity and writing as subject matter for writing. Thus, the book is a private version of the problems and solutions Barth had presented in The Literature of Exhaustion: the recognition that narrative forms are exhausted is followed by the understanding that that very exhaustion can become the means of generating new narratives.

This position is also held by Bryant ("A lecture in the nature of fiction, disguised as a kind of retelling of some very old stories"<sup>4</sup>), Davis ("the artist's challenge at this point is to use that exhaustion as subject and technique to produce original literature"<sup>5</sup>), and Powell ("far from a mere exercise in technique but an artistic product of the ideas presented in The Literature of Exhaustion"<sup>6</sup>). However, having taken this common position these three have widely differing opinions as to the aesthetic merit and value of this procedure. After a consideration of the work itself, I will return to the positions they present in order to demonstrate the parameters of the wider debate about post-modernism as an artistic mode.

To all but the most casual and inattentive of readers, Chimera is a difficult book because its structure is so complex. I intend to begin with the broadest example of structural complexity and then work gradually further into these complexities in the hope that this will reveal the highly crafted nature of the text and thus provide some explication of a strategy for reading it. Jac Tharpe

makes a brief allusion to the overall design of the book when he writes

He may have used the proportions of the Golden Triangle to arrive at the number of pages in each of the three stories - 56,78,174 - though he has reversed the order. He may even manage to get the climax of the story of the book, or both, at the point of the proportion labelled climax, wherever that point is.

This pagination does not seem to be a coincidence. Tharpe used the Random House text and I have checked, and verified, his findings against the re-set Quartet text. Tharpe's findings here might interestingly be compared to my earlier remarks about numerological and cryptological ordering in Lost in the Funhouse.<sup>2</sup> The importance of these proportions is that, as Tharpe notes, Barth is

following the pattern of Golden triangles, Golden Sections and Golden ratios with reference to the Phi value used for centuries as a constant in harmonious and symmetrical design.<sup>3</sup>

The book is designed as a whole with thoughts of balanced and 'perfect' architectural structures very much in mind. This draws into view the two conceptions of plot implicit in Aristotle's Poetics; plot as mythos, and plot as arche. That is, plot as a sequence of events - "a sequence of ordered meanings going towards a destination" - and plot as "a total impression of a situation"<sup>10</sup>. To an extent, of course, this is an artificial distinction, as Brower demonstrates with reference to Ibsen (specifically to The Wild Duck), concluding

Although an abstract structure of incidents may be present to the writer planning his novel or play, only plot 'written' concerns the critic.<sup>11</sup>

Brower is right when he argues the practical inseparability and I accept, in this specific sense, his

vituperations against the 'heresy of plot'. But he is wrong when he elevates the practical, pragmatic, aspect of criticism into a theoretical impossibility. Wrong, because, as Propp and Genette<sup>12</sup>

have shown it is possible to posit a theoretical separation between plot as linear sequence and plot as design.

For reasons which I shall later make clear Propp's argument, although well rehearsed by now, is worth re-examining briefly. He argues that individual plots can be broken down into a sequence of functions which it is then possible to synthesise into a simple master-plot. He moves from a linear conception of plot to an architectural one, from his analysis of a sequence of narrative functions to the statement that "All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure"<sup>13</sup>. For Propp, the meaning of the position of individual functions is only revealed when the overall structure is available to the reader. Although this is a somewhat static notion of plot, it is useful to set it beside the linear version with which we are familiar. It has an obvious parallel with the distinction between narration and narrating. The point is further reinforced by Genette thus

we know that the most classical detective story, although generally focalised through the investigating detective, most often hides from us a part of his discoveries and inductions until the final revelation<sup>14</sup>

That is, that the concentration on the detective corresponds to the narrating voice whilst at the same time we know that an architectural version of plot will be revealed by the conclusion of the narration.

Having made the theoretical distinction, however, Propp insists on the practical inseparability: "A function cannot be defined apart from its place in the process of narration"<sup>15</sup>. Culler re-inforces in the following fashion

for readers the functional unit of the plot is a paradigm with various members, any of which can be chosen for a particular story, just as the phoneme is a functional unit which can be manifested in various ways in actual utterances.<sup>16</sup>

Genette's insistence on the analysis of narrative discourse being the study of relationships between, on the one hand,

a discourse and the events that it recounts (narrative in its second meaning), on the other hand the relationship between the same discourse and the act that produces it.<sup>17</sup>

goes still further towards strengthening Propp and Culler's case.

The significance of this theoretical separability and practical inseparability for Chimera is revealed in the authorial lecture delivered in "Bellerophoniad", specifically the section on the Principle of Metaphoric Means

by which I mean the investiture by the writer of as many of the elements and aspects of his fiction as possible with emblematic as well as dramatic value: not only the 'form' of the story, the narrative viewpoint, the tone, and such, but, where manageable, the particular genre, the mode and medium, the very process of narration - even the fact of the artifact itself.<sup>18</sup>

It is not only the individual tales contained within Chimera that are involved with design, it is also true of the whole book and the processes by which the complete text is produced. What is at issue, though, is the significance of this overall structure. On the one hand, it is designed with the principles of architectural



balance and perfection in mind; on the other hand, it becomes

a beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longeurs, lumps, lacunae, a kind of monstrous mixed metaphor<sup>19</sup>

What has been the subject matter for Barth since the earliest novels, the search for ordering principles and the discovery of absurdity in both that search and that ordering, becomes, here, part of the structuration of the work, and, in "Perseid" and "Bellerophoniad", its difficulty also becomes part of the ostensible subject-matter as the two narrators attempt to establish their relationship to the pattern of mythic heroism.

When we move from the overall structure to the various designs of the three texts we discover an acute awareness, and employment, of highly complex narrative discourses.

In Genette's terms, we must remain acutely aware of the relationship between story, narrative and narrating

I propose, without insisting on the obvious reasons for my choice of terms, the use of the word story for the signified or narrative content (even if this content turns out, in a given case, to be low in dramatic intensity or fullness of incident), to use the word narrative for the signifier, discourse or narrative text itself, and to use the word narrating for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place.<sup>20</sup>

with special attention on the last of these three. For, as Genette writes if it goes without saying that the existence of those adventures in no way depends on the action of telling (supposing that, like Ulysses, we look at them as real), it is just as evident that the narrative discourse ("narrative of Ulysses" in the first meaning of the term) depends absolutely on that action of telling, since the narrative discourse is produced by the action of telling in the same way that any statement is the product of an act of enunciating.<sup>21</sup>

Cynthia Davis holds a different position to this and argues that there are two main areas of tension in the work

- 1) primarily structural
- 2) involved with narrative tones and attitudes in relationship to that structure (strict formal control vs. tentative note)<sup>22</sup>

By posing a fixed structure she finds a contradiction where I find a dialectic between the individual artist and the artistic tradition. However, Genette's insistence on a concentration on the relationships between the layers of narrative is borne out by the following passage from

"Dunyazadiad"

on such questions as whether a story might be imaginably be framed from inside, as it were, so that the usual relation between container and contained would be reversed and paradoxically reversible - and (for my benefit, I suppose) what human state of affairs such an odd construction might usefully figure.<sup>23</sup>

Before considering how this passage acts as a demonstration of the accuracy of Genette's observations, let us briefly rehearse the narrative structure of "Dunyazadiad", arranged as it is on seven levels. At the heart lies the tales which make 1001 Nights; beyond this is the story of Scheherazade and Dunyazade as told by Dunyazade to Shah Zaman. Beyond this is Dunyazade's crisis when she discovers that, having told her tale, she is in the same situation as her sister; next is the tale of Dunyazade and Shah Zaman on their wedding night, as told by an impersonal narrator; beyond this is the king who reads the thirty volumes of 1001 Nights long after the death of Shahryar; and beyond this is "Dunyazadiad". Now, Cynthia Davis sees these as arranged in concentric

circles; that is, each one enclosing those which lie within it. And yet this seems to be ignoring two things. First, the spurious ontology Barth ascribes to 1001 Nights in which the Genie tells Scheherazade tales he has learned from The Thousand and One Nights to tell to Shahryar. Secondly, and more explicitly, there is the endless speculation between Scheherazade and the Genie

on such questions as whether a story might be imaginably be framed from inside, as it were, so that the usual relation between container and contained would be reversed and paradoxically reversible - and (for my benefit, I suppose) what human state of affairs such an odd construction might usefully figure.<sup>24</sup>

Given the Genie's disparaging of "the artless and arbitrary relation between most frames and framing tale"<sup>25</sup> this paradoxical structure is obviously to be viewed as desirable. Barth's preferences are also clearly in the same field, as is demonstrated by his practical and theoretical interrelating of the two. Thus, Davis's view of the structure of "Dunyazadiad" as a series of concentric circles is too simple and needs to be replaced with an awareness of how this undeniable structure is acted upon by a different principle of structuring based upon the narrative voices as an organising force.

With this view, it is possible to see the irony behind the virgin (and naive) voice being precisely the voice which explains how the complex narrative and narrating of "Dunyazadiad" is concluded like a chain of orgasms. Other ironies and ambiguities are also revealed by this perspective. The Genie, with his sexual and artistic difficulties, is clearly Barth - revealed in his funny and self-ironic self-portrait.

he wasn't frightening, though he was strange-looking enough; a light-skinned fellow of forty or so, smooth-shaven and bald as a roc's egg. His clothes were simple but outlandish; he was tall and healthy and pleasant enough in appearance, except for queer lenses that he wore in a frame over his eyes.<sup>26</sup>

This "former writer of tales", with all of his doubts about the capacity and value of the written word, becomes the author of this text. Despite the doubts he expresses via the metaphor of the Maryland snail he has begun to write again.

There's a kind of snail in the Maryland marshes - perhaps I invented him - that makes his shell as he goes along out of whatever he comes across, cementing it with his own juices, and at the same time makes his path instinctively toward the best available material for his shell; he carries his history on his back, living in it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he grows. That snail's pace has become my pace - but I'm going in circles, following my own trail! I've quit reading and writing; I've lost track of who I am; my name's just a jumble of letters; so's the whole body of literature: strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code that I've lost the key to.<sup>27</sup>

The choice of metaphor here is clearly related to the earlier debate about the relation between the individual voice and the traditions to which it relates itself, and here it has become a self-defeating (or self-exhausting) version of the relationship as every new work is instantly absorbed into the dead tradition.

Finally, the 'I' of the third section is radically ambiguous. On the one hand, it is clearly the impersonal narrator of the whole of "Dunyazadiad" but, equally clearly, it is also Scheherazade (Dunyazade is referred to as "little sister"). The shifting status of the narrative voice in "Dunyazadiad" is, perhaps, the clearest practical example of the tale as a container which contains its own container. The structure of

"Dunyazadiad" has been de-schematised into a wickedly complex design reminiscent, again, of M.C. Escher's defiances of the laws of gravity and common sense as he plays with the possibilities of reproducing three dimensions on a flat surface.

"Perseid" is designed from a motif in "Dunyazadiad": that of "the form of a spiral shell" from which Barth spins, as he vowed he would in "Dunyazadiad", a "whirling galaxy, a golden shower of fiction"<sup>23</sup>, and for that reason it may be more tempting to see here Cynthia Davis's distinction between structure and narrative voice as operative, if only because both are more heightened than they are in "Dunyazadiad". But, though outlining the manner in which these are employed, I will go on to argue that Genette's model is again more appropriate.

Morrell, for example, suggests that, under the influence of Gardner's articles on mathematical games in Scientific American<sup>24</sup>, Barth theorised in a scientific manner on the production of a spiral shell. Fibonacci's discovery of a numerical series which, when reproduced graphically sketches a spiral (1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34,55,89,144,233,377,610,etc), is clearly the model for Calyxa's temple.

I opened eyes upon a couch or altar, a velvet gold rectangle with murex-purple cushions, more or less centred in a marble chamber that unwound from my left-foot corner in a grand spiral like the triton-shell that Dedalus threaded for Cocalus, once about the bed and out of sight. Upon its walls curved graven scenes in low relief, each half again and more its predecessor's breadth, to the number of seven where the chamber wound from view.<sup>25</sup>

Over the following five pages, Perseus describes the proportions of the panels and their depiction of mythic

narrative as it exists in Graves; that is, up to the end of what we learn in our reading of "Perseid", the completion of his first cycle of development. His description of the chamber matches exactly the development of the Fibonacci series - that much has been noted on numerous occasions by previous critics. What has not been stressed sufficiently is the strained relationship between the architectural design of the chamber and the linear narrative voice which is shaping it. The idea that a story can have a structure which is both static and dynamic seems to contain an obvious contradiction. Barth's attempt here to produce a narrative which has both of these qualities is a microcosm of the more general attempt that the whole of Chimera represents, to hold contradictions together.

In "Perseid", the attempt is made via the idea of doubling, of repetition, that lies at the beginning of the chamber and at the heart of the narrative of "Perseid". For Perseus is telling the story of his telling of the story of his recapitulation of the first cycle of his narrative to Medusa in the same words as he used to Calyxa when he told the story of his recapitulation of the first cycle! Furthermore, I assume, as the story begins "Good evening" and concludes "Good night. Good night", the narration lasts as long as the constellation of Perseus and Medusa is in the night sky and is repeated every night the constellation is visible. And, as the thematic design of the text re-emphasises recapitulation rather than repetition, I also assume that what we have before us is one version of the textual structure outlined above. What

is important, though, is the sense that Perseus as protagonist and as authorial voice is in a position which is constantly shifting with regard to his subject matter and his narration of it.

At the same time, the relation of actual time to narrative time is changing: it is slowing down. As Christian Metz writes

Narrative is a .. double temporal sequence ...: There is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative (the time of the signified and the time of the signifier). This duality not only renders possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives (three years of the hero's life summed up in two sentences of a novel or in a few shots of a "frequentative" montage in film, etc.). More basically, it invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme.<sup>32</sup>

In "Perseid" this process operates in the following fashion. The first seven panels tell the story of the first cycle of Perseus's mythic heroism and none of them are more than thirty-four metres long. The second seven tell the story of his recapitulation of the journey to the status of mythic hero and as the scenes are related they are reproduced by Calyxa as an extension of the spiral. Thus "each in the second whorl echoed its counterpart in the first, behind which it stood"<sup>33</sup>. Also, as Perseus approaches ever closer in his narrating to the present, the panels grow until he reaches the following thought, "that like the inward turns of the spiral, my history would forever approach a present point but never reach it?"<sup>34</sup>.

As Genette writes

The temporal duality so sharply emphasised here, and referred to by German theoreticians as the opposition between erzählte Zeit(story time) and Erzahlzeit(narrative time), is a typical characteristic not only of cinematic narrative but also of oral

narrative, at all its levels of aesthetic elaboration, including the fully "literary" level of recitation or dramatic narration.<sup>35</sup>

And, as we are now reading at least the fourth stage in the cycle, the relation between story time and narrative time has become still more disparate as the panels wind through space and time towards infinity. That is why the voice we first hear speaking in "Perseid" insists

Stories last longer than men, stones than stories, stars than stones. But even our stars' nights are numbered, and with them will pass this patterned tale to a long-deceased earth.<sup>36</sup>

Also, as narrative time grows at a vastly quicker rate than story time the final narrating desire appears -

My love, it's an epilogue, always ending, never ended, like (I don't apologise) 11-G, which winds through universal space and time. My fate is to be able only to imagine boundless beauty from my experience of boundless love - but I have a fair imagination to work with, and, to work from, one priceless piece of unimagined evidence: what I hold above Beta Persei, Medusa: not serpents, but lovely woman's hair. I'm content. So with this issue, our net estate: to have become, like the noted music of our tongue, these silent, visible signs; to be the tale I tell to those with eyes to see and understanding to interpret; to raise you up forever and know that our story will never cut off, but nightly rehearsed as long as men and women read the stars ... I'm content. Till tomorrow evening, love.<sup>37</sup>

This urge, for narrative to outweigh story, is quintessentially postmodern. At the same time it returns us to that moment in Tristram Shandy, to which reference has already been made in the earlier chapter on The Floating Opera, when Tristram regrets that no matter how quickly he writes, narrative time will always be outstripped by real time. The more he writes, the more there will be to write about.

It is also replicated in the final section of Chimera, when we realise that the narrating voice is that of Polyeidus-as-the-pages-of-the-text. But this



realisation comes close to the end of "Bellerophoniad", and must be preceded by an analysis of the changes in narrating voice within this, the most complex of the three texts. First it is, like "Perseid", a double narration with Bellerophon speaking to both Philonoe and Melanippe. Secondly it reverts to "Dunyazadiad"'s narrative structure in having three parts:

the main character narrating, the outside narrator in a two-person scene, and an address from the artist figure (Polyeidus, openly identified with Barth).<sup>38</sup>

This combination allows for extremes of complexity with regard to the narrating voice - it is no longer the case that the narrator is simply a constant around which listeners become arranged in a shifting pattern but also that within a single passage different narrating voices are revealed as the source of each other - and also as the provider of the ontological status of the text (when insecurities similar to those of Scheherazade and the Genie in "Dunyazadiad" enter).

This structure may appear chaotically complex, but Barth has insisted that

if one's ground sense of the world is a chaos, then it may be surely some kind of reaction to that lost account for a concern with elegant or at least coherent firm formal structures, so that there will be something to hold together what basically wants to fly apart.<sup>39</sup>

In passing, it is worth remarking that this impulse is strikingly similar to that of The Sot-Weed Factor, where the coherence of the eighteenth-century novel form holds the chaotic plot in balance. This concern, that unbridled chaos be held in control by aesthetic form, could also be said to be one of the figures of Barth's postmodernism.

With its narrative complexity and its attention to the dubious ontology of fiction, "Bellerophoniad" can be seen as the epitome of Chimera. With its assembly of narrative voices, connotative references, and reproduction of source material "Bellerophoniad" can also be seen as the epitome of Barth's fiction up to 1972. It also casts (veiled) glances towards the later work. Just as Giles Goat-Boy operated as an encyclopaedia of narrative possibilities, "Bellerophoniad" is an encyclopaedia of Barth's own narrative experiments and concerns. And, just as in the earlier two texts, it is the positioning of narrating voices (and their relationships both to one another and to their listeners) which makes this possible. The various guises under which he has previously presented the concern with the mutability of authority are here compacted in such a way that the narrating voice is simultaneously several characters (Bellerophon, Melanippe, Polyeidus, Barth, the student) and none (when Polyeidus shape-shifts into the pages of the text). Perseus's opening spiral, in "Bellerophoniad", operates for Bellerophon in both directions at once - opening towards infinity and also closing in onto itself. At the end, the missing word to be supplied by the reader - "it's a ...." is the first word of the whole text, its title: Chimera

And, if we see the earlier malady of cosmopsis as an externalisation of writer's block then in this way all the earlier work leads towards this moment at the end of "Bellerophoniad".

But the text is not simply a tour de force of narrative technique, as Jerry Bryant asserts when he calls

Chimera "a lecture on the nature of fiction"<sup>40</sup>. Even if it was only this study in technique, Bryant's attack on Barth -

if the novel is dead, it's because intelligent writers like Barth who could continue to re-create it, haven't found a way to say something about the world but only a new way to say something about saying something about the world.<sup>41</sup>

- is not justified because the discovery of a new method of articulation is a necessary first step in the process of saying something new.

Jerry Powell is much closer to the mark when he writes that Chimera is "far from a mere exercise in technique but an artistic product of the ideas presented in The Literature of Exhaustion"<sup>42</sup>. The story of Chimera, particularly in "Perseid" and "Bellerophoniad" is the interrogation of the status of heroism. Of what it means to be a hero. This is what lies behind Perseus and Bellerophon's recapitulation of their journey to the status of mythic heroes. In doing that they are answering the question posed in Giles Goat-Boy: is a hero a hero ...?

truly it seemed to me that a deed became Grand-Tutorial from its having been done by the Grand Tutor and in no other way: at the same time, that the Grand Tutor defines himself ineluctably and exclusively in the Grand-Tutoriality of His deeds.<sup>43</sup>

Just as Propp proposed a single overarching model to encompass all particular narrative manifestations, so Raglan and Campbell propose a single Pattern to enclose all performances of heroism. But the problem for Barth's narrating heroes is that, as Cynthia Davis puts it, "the pattern and its individual expressions are not the same, can never be the same"<sup>44</sup>. They must, then, recapitulate

their story in order to discover whether they have acted as they have because they are heroes conforming to the Pattern or simply because that is the way they have acted (i.e., coincidentally conforming). In doing that, recapitulation becomes not only a test (or a source) of heroism, it also becomes an aesthetic method in which the hero becomes an artist, and the artist a hero. This, in turn, recapitulates a series of themes from (most obviously) Lost in the Funhouse and also from the earlier works.

In describing this process thus,

Barth's narrating characters are struggling to achieve a sense of self largely by telling their stories, and their difficulty is emphasised by the fact that they only learn about their lives by telling them, for they have forgotten or not finished living them, and cannot see them as wholes.<sup>45</sup>,

Cynthia Davis seems to have moved closer to my own earlier argument, in which the status of the narrative voice is crucial. The process of recapitulation is never completed precisely because it is the process which generates meaning, and not its conclusion.

We can arrive at somewhat the same position by considering Jerry Powell's suggestion

a hero acts according to his conception of heroics, based on past actions, yet his present actions redefine what heroics are for the future. A hero is a hero if he acts heroically.<sup>46</sup>

The Pattern itself is open to constant adaptation through the impact of individual manifestations of heroism. That is why, for Powell, Bellerophon is no true hero. He is the perfect imitator, and indeed his story is filled with perfect imitations, but in being that he is not expanding or deepening meaning. As I have argued earlier, in

relation to The Sot-Weed Factor and Jong's Fanny, Barth's aesthetic project is based upon the revitalisation of exhausted form precisely by establishing a space between original and copy - a space in which the reader generates meaning.

This emphasis on difference is contemporaneous with the shift in emphasis in structuralist criticism which came in 1970 with Barthes's S/Z. For Barthes, the centre of attention lies not in the investigation of conformity to narrative patterns but in the differences from that pattern.

A choice must be then made: either to place all texts in a demonstrative oscillation, equalising them under the scrutiny of an indifferent science, forcing them to rejoin, inductively, the Copy from which they will derive; or else to restore each text, not to its individuality, but to its function, making it cohere, even before we talk about it, by the infinite paradigm of difference, subjecting it from the outset to a basic typology, to an evaluation.<sup>47</sup>

In Saussure's terms, it is a shift from attention on the *langue* to attention on the *parole*. It is also a move towards presenting a theory of diachronic change - although this is an implication studiously avoided by the latter theorists of structuralism. In stressing the space between the formal capacities of a particular narrative mode and the contemporary manifestation of that mode Barth is precisely arguing for a re-vitalisation - a bringing back to life - of narrative forms which have been discarded.

Two further points support this. First, Barth's dictum that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" (not ontogeny imitates phylogeny in a specific fashion) allows for the changing of phylogeny through the pressure of

ontogeny and thus for the continuing vitality of phylogeny. This is the source of Giles Goat-Boy's 'failure' in Giles Goat-Boy - he imitates, performs perfectly according to the Pattern but in a world in which the Pattern has been stripped of significance. Secondly, Powell's insistence that Barth, in Chimera, is "treating myths realistically, instead of treating reality in accordance with archetypal patterns"<sup>43</sup> also re-inforces the notion that Barth is re-employing exhausted narrative forms. The contemporary, if idiosyncratic, linguistic strategies of the narrators in Chimera propel the question of heroism into the contemporary world.

This emphasis on the space between pattern and performance is also a mark of postmodernism's aesthetics. Realism's project of reproducing the real world in actuality and potentiality is set aside in favour of the philosophy of 'as if'. Epistemologies and ontologies are generated out of the specific performances of the text which present alternative methods of living. As Kiernan Ryan has argued:

Textual polyphony is produced by ahistorically determinate sense of the human potentiality to live otherwise than the existing order of things allows. It exacts the revelation through the text that the restrictive channels into which people's identities and relationships are forced by the status quo are not unalterably fixed, but conditional and subject to change. This revelation is also furthered through recurrent, related techniques of literary relativisation and extrangement.<sup>43</sup>

For Barth, and for (historically) fabulation and (contemporarily) postmodernism, we need only to change the first word from 'textual' to 'ontological' or 'epistemological' for these three sentences to be wholly apposite.

That sense of proliferating alternatives has been present in Barth's writing from very early on, as is evidenced by the recapitulated passage from The End of the Road in Chimera. With this, and with the other recapitulations of earlier work, Barth draws together all the technical narrative devices employed in Chimera into an "artistic product of the ideas presented in The Literature of Exhaustion"<sup>50</sup>.

In conclusion, then, let me return to the wider debate about postmodernism as an aesthetic mode. With the publication of works by Ihab Hassan and Gerald Graff, the nature of the argument has become an investigation of the status of postmodernism as a breakthrough (with the former arguing in favour of, and the latter against, this position). I wish to adopt a third position which, broadly speaking, argues that whilst springing from the same roots as modernism, postmodernism is a different mode; neither better nor worse, but different.

Within (very) broad parameters, modernism offers a challenge to syntactically and linguistically ordered modes of perception received from the nineteenth century. In Gertrude Stein, for example, the sentence is regarded as defunct as a limiting unit for the ordering of narrative perception. For Pound, via Fenollosa, the ideogram assumes importance. These, and a myriad of other examples, led to the charge of obscurity being levelled at the 'high modernists'. Indeed, the hostility of American aesthetics to any form of modernist experiment has a long history, stretching back at least as far as Theodore Roosevelt's ridiculing of Marcel Duchamp's "Nude

descending a staircase" at the Armory Show in 1913, and a perseverance which has only really been challenged (and then only peripherally) since the Second World War. The move of the Abstract Expressionists to the centre of the American art world is a notable exception and even then the reasons for their rise to fame were political rather than aesthetic - as Max Kozloff has demonstrated.<sup>51</sup> The sum total of this campaign against modernism was and is its ghettoisation and its reduction to the status of plaything of the idle rich and the aristocratic.

For Barth, as for those other American writers operating within the (perceived) traditions of liberal democracy but equally well being unwilling to concede to a naive realism - a group of writers perhaps created by the post-war conditions of affluence and expansion in higher education and thus not as immediately subject to the commands of the market -, the charge of elitism has to be countered by ordering a total (new) vision into the received linguistic mode. The challenge then becomes not to the linguistic order but to the generic order - the novel is challenged as a limiting unit. The strategy is fundamentally the same, but the tactics are so widely different as to be perceived as being of a different order. This perception is a long time in coming, and is marked by the gradual elimination of the hyphen in post-modernist until the term becomes postmodernist. The differences in tactics between the modernists and the post-modernists mount up until a qualitative change between the two becomes apparent and the hyphen (with all its connotations of inheritance and debt) evaporates.



Kiernan Ryan identifies two recurrent (and related)

techniques in modernism and analyses them thus:

One is the 'baring of the device': the reflexive insistence on the fiction as fiction, the work's self-conscious flaunting of its own constructed status. This does not convey, as the modernist critic would have it, that the text is a self-referential imaginative universe enigmatically divorced from the real world of history. It communicates the much more dissident understanding that the contemporary reality aesthetically figured by the text is an equally scripted and hence provisional version of human existence.

The other widespread strategem I would underline is the foregrounding of the work's language as language, which robs it of self-evident transparency, and thereby thwarts the assumption that the meanings which that language conveys are naturally pregiven and intrinsic to the world. In the case of a work employing a single linguistic register, such reflexivity ensures that the work is framed and conditionalised as a particular, partial discourse testifying to the existence of other actual or possible ways of seeing. In the case of a plurality of linguistic registers, the text is displayed as consisting not in a single, unified language, presuming and expressing a universally agreed reality, but in a discordant variety of specific discourses, whose contingent structures of meaning and value imply a no less fabricated and disputable social world.<sup>52</sup>

For modernism, the latter is foregrounded. For postmodernism, it is foregrounded via the latter. The difference is the difference between an epistemological interrogation of realist literature and an ontological questioning of its precepts.

For Barth's postmodernism this means that his earlier concerns for style now need to be inserted into formal designs which can contain this stylistic virtuosity. This is not, however, an easy marriage and reflects the difficulties of bringing together static and dynamic models of literature which I was describing earlier. Style, the linguistic unfolding of thought within a sentence, is by its nature dynamic. Formal design is static in so far as it is the trace of the architectonic impulse which initially structured the text. The common

method by which this unease is disguised is concealment of the plot and its patterns. As the text unfolds before the reader, it reveals its design. This is why so many critics identify the detective novel as the epitome of fiction, because its primary impulse is the revelation of plot. But those texts which are redolent with designs are normally those which we judge to be the *great* texts because they reveal depths which lie beneath that simple revelation. Of all the detective novelists, Chandler stands out for his distinctive style which gradually uncovers itself as we learn to read his writing and James M. Cain is often at his most impressive as a theoretician of crime fiction when describing the care and craft he devoted to his art.

The critical response to this unhappy marriage has been to prioritise one or the other; to fasten upon the static or the dynamic elements of the work as its life blood. Postwar American criticism can be divided (albeit with an unbecoming neatness) into those who see literature in "transhistorical terms, as the embodiment either of a timeless verbal symbol or of the eternal recurrences of archetypal myth"<sup>53</sup> and those who see it in historical terms. Philip Rahv summarised the differences between the two thus

the one essential function of myth stressed by all writers is that in merging past and present it releases us from the flux of temporality, arresting change in the timeless, the permanent, the ever-recurrent conceived as 'sacred repetitions'. Hence the mythic is the polar opposite of what we mean by the historical, which stands for process, inexorable change, incessant permutation and innovation.<sup>54</sup>

The former has obviously been the more dominant version and has, in one form or another, been capable of absorbing

most of the critical paradigms and practices since the Second World War. Even the textually absorbed New Criticism has not been immune to its influence, as Cleanth Brooks's rhetoric of the 'architecture of the poem' and his description of the poem as 'a pattern of resolved stresses' shows. The dynamics of style, of language on the page, are subsumed beneath the search for a static metaphor with which to account for the work under inspection.

The relevance of this general formulation to Barth's Chimera is at its most obvious in "Perseid", with its image of the story as an architectural pattern as one of the two organising principles behind the piece. But throughout the whole book the balance between mythic structure and linear/dynamic narrative is constantly breaking down in favour of the former. The overall contradiction is in the engagement between the predetermined structure attempting to impose itself onto the chaos of existence and the opposed attempt of the human voice to tell and re-tell its stories. The confusion which centres around repetition is the main marker of this, as the same pattern of words takes up different resonances according to the circumstances into which it is inserted.

Characteristically, this is expressed through humorous renderings of the emphasis on the space between pattern and performance as the author confounds the reader by constructing arrangements of words on the page which are exactly the same and which are only rendered into difference by the context of the speaking voice. The

clumsy employment of processions of enclosing and enclosed quotation marks used in "Menelaiad" has been replaced by the device of inferred context.

This is not only another version of the dialectic between two different and opposed structural principles, but also of that between the individual artist and the artistic tradition, with which Barth has been concerned throughout his career. On the one hand, the speaking voice is reduced to re-telling the same story endlessly as a mark of continuing creativity, and on the other hand that endless repetition is just another version of producing perfect imitations - which, as "Bellerophoniad" shows, is no road to creative literature or heroism. Between these two poles this text is constantly vacillating until, at the breakdown of the text's production, the effort to mediate autobiographical experience through art's conduits is abandoned in favour of the archetype of the literature of exhaustion: fiction whose subject and occasion is the inability to write.

But it is not only the autobiographical event which cripples the text at this point; it is its own inability to hold together a series of opposed principles. Repetition and imitation, structural design and narrative voice, fiction and autobiography; all these proceed in different directions from each other and the text is torn apart by the strains placed upon it, just as the text which is Polyeidus disintegrates. The conclusion of this was that, for the next several years, Barth would be engaged in the search for an organising principle which could hold all of these elements together.

The consequences of this failure for Barth's experimentalism have to be considered as severe because it points towards his continuing commitment to the old forms of artistic organisation. Before, this had been a productive tension as it had fed into the writing of The Floating Opera, The End of the Road, The Sot-Weed Factor, and Giles Goat-Boy. Now it has become a disastrous attempt to retain conservative elements in a fiction which was striving towards a new form of postmodernism. In this the performing voice was to become the principle of organisation in all its fluidity and creative capacity.<sup>55</sup>

Letters:

postmodernism

as a literature of synthesis

By his own account, Barth began Letters on October 30th 1973 and completed it on July 4th 1978. But that very phrase 'by his own account' raises an immediate difficulty, for this information is drawn from two of the letters in Letters dated respectively March 2nd 1969 and September 14th 1969 (and summarised in the contents of the novel as "Letters is 'now' begun" and "Letters is 'now' ended") and written by a character in the novel named the Author. He comments, from an authorial and authoritative position, on the ambiguity of the word 'now'

Now it's not 10/30/73 any longer, either. In the time between my first setting down "March 2, 1969" and now, "now" has become January 1974 ... The plan of LETTERS calls for a second letter to the reader at the end of the manuscript, by when what I've "now" recorded will seem already as remote as "March 2, 1969". By the time LETTERS is in print, ditto for what shall be recorded in that final letter. And - to come at last to the last of a letter's times - by the time your eyes, Reader, review these epistolary fictive a's-to-z's, the "United States of America" maybe setting about its Tri- or Quadricentennial, or may still be floundering through its Bi-, or be a mere memory.'

A further ambiguity is that these two frame-letters are neither the beginning nor the end of the text; six letters typographically precede the first and five letters chronologically post-date the latter (ending with Todd Andrews' draft codicil thrown from the top of the Tower of Truth on September 26th). Beyond this, the design of the text comes from Ambrose's post-script to his letter of September 22nd to the Author.

The design of the work is (literally) spelt out in Ambrose's post-script. It is "an old time epistolary novel by seven fictitious drolls & dreamers, each of which imagines himself actual", each of whom produces letters according to the design sketched on the calendar. Whilst

it is possible to separate these into seven groups according to the correspondents, it is also true that

The number and range of intertwining plots and subplots and their tortuousness, is such that it very effectively defies summarising, unless one has the ambition to even outdo Borges's Pierre Menard.<sup>2</sup>

My ambition is somewhat less than that, although my study of this book involves an exploration of the implications and meanings of specific moments in the plot.

Beyond this formal design, Barth's essay The Literature of Replenishment suggests a motivation. As Schulz has written

if the postmodernist synthesis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century realism with twentieth-century modernism seems uncannily to describe LETTERS, that too is an exercise in literary self-definition and critical hindsight authors are privileged to practise.<sup>3</sup>

For this reason I would foreground the story of Ambrose's courtship of Germaine; the modernist's courting of the great tradition, of the woman who has known the great makers of European literature. It may well not be too much to suggest that Letters itself is the product of their union - it is to them that the wedding toast containing all the letters of the alphabet is sent by the author.

But before I turn to them specifically there are a series of more general statements still to make about the book. One is that the over-arching theme of the novel is recapitulation. Barth is recapitulating his earlier work - five of the letter writers are characters (or the children thereof) from earlier works. These characters themselves are engaged in the recapitulation of their lives, both physical and literary. This led, initially, to a wave of



critical hostility towards the novel but it must be emphasised that it is a crucial part of the novel that this is so. For, as Ambrose writes,

last-ditch provincial Modernist wishes neither to repeat nor to repudiate career so far; wants the century under his belt but not on his back.<sup>4</sup>

The first step towards fulfilling this wish is for the author to get his own work 'off his back'. Also, given that the novel is written in that most literary (and letterly) of forms - the epistolary novel - a concern with the world of literature is almost inevitable (and within that world he naturally stands closest to his own work).

In terms of the seminal essay, The Literature of Exhaustion, it is an obvious first step to see Letters as John Barth's encounter with what is, perhaps, one of the major exhausted forms. Indeed if one wished to construct a history of literature in which nineteenth-century realism is seen as a brief aberration - a project Barth and other metafictionists have sketched - then the epistolary novel begins to appear centrestage quite rapidly. As Singer has pointed out, "what is acknowledged to be the first American novel, The Power of Sympathy (by Sarah Wentworth Morton), was in epistolary form".<sup>5</sup> He then goes on to demonstrate the continuing production of this mode of writing throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-century in America.

It is worth pausing, at this point, to make a few remarks about the epistolary novel as a mode of writing which would attract Barth's attention beyond its simply historical status and subsequent decline. As I have

written above, it is the most 'literary' form primarily, and obviously, because it is composed of letters.<sup>6</sup> All the elements of the work are enclosed within the process of writing; that is, they are ordered and presented overtly through the medium of language. Therefore, language loses any transparency. Eagleton recognises the importance of this when he writes

Epic theatre, by virtue of its variable viewpoint, disowns one's traditional device for securing ideological closure: the presence of a coherent over-view or 'metalanguage' which may direct the audience's response. On the contrary, the closure the theatre seeks to effect is nothing less than the militant viewpoint that all such metalanguages must be suspected. By using the epistolary form, Richardson equally deprives himself of this resource: you cannot have an authorial over-voice if the characters do all the writing.<sup>7</sup>

For Barth, this permits the construction of an unsettling ontology in which no one voice (not even the authorial) is authoritative. The different voices construct different versions of events and one is never allowed access to a privileged meta-voice which closes one's interpretation in a definitive fashion.

The second point to make about epistolary fiction is that it has, since its inception, foregrounded artifice in a fashion of which Barth (presumably) would approve. As Kany points out

for more than a century before Pamela, epistolary fiction developed in England by means of four important stock situations: the rifled postbag, the letters of travel, the friendly correspondence, and the correspondence of lovers.<sup>8</sup>

By employing this mode, Barth gives himself access to the implications of a literature in which artifice is foregrounded and in which language is material and opaque

(by which I mean that we, as readers, are constantly aware of the conditions under which the text has been produced).

Both of these factors were crucial in the conception behind The Literature of Exhaustion. A third factor from that essay maps out the ground on which Letters stands. After the silence at the end of Molloy, Barth writes,

it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature - such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation ... even characterisation! Even plot! - if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one's predecessors have been up to.<sup>9</sup>

Barth is also at pains in The Literature of Replenishment to correct any notion possibly received from The Literature of Exhaustion about his rejection of modernism as a positive force. For

if the modernists, carrying the torch of romanticism, taught us that linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naive illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote, and middle-class moral conventions are not the whole story, then, from the perspective of these closing decades of our century we may appreciate that the contraries of these things are not the whole story either.<sup>10</sup>

With this clearly in the front of his mind, a literature of replenishment becomes "the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as pre-modernist and modernist modes of writing"<sup>11</sup>. For Theo D'Haen this synthesis marks the beginnings of a new start in literature:

if LETTERS marks the exhaustion of a particular realistic narrative form, it also, and at the same time, illustrates the emergence of an alternative form. LETTERS itself self-consciously discusses its own relationship to the history of fiction. It situates itself in a tradition alternative to that of the realist novel though for the past two-hundred years or so overshadowed by it. This tradition emphasises not the imitation of 'life' or 'reality' but of writing itself: it sees fiction as creating the world rather than imitating it.<sup>12</sup>

Once one has accepted this premise, it is easy to see how the vast wealth of historical material contained in the volume fits in. Not only is it historical material which has been overshadowed by other accounts but also, as Schulz has it,

Barth, like Cervantes in his confrontation with an antiquated cultural heritage, has put American history under the multiple lens of an 'Action Historiography' of factual and fictive perspectives.<sup>13</sup>

What exists is not the event prior to its writing, but the inscription itself. Or rather, events exist but do not acquire significant meaning until inscribed and, furthermore, that meaning is only provisional in that the kaleidoscope of means of inscribing and the point of view from which this takes place is constantly shifting.

*Praeteritas futuras fecundant*, certainly; but in a multitude of ways. The past is mediated in a variety of fashions, and each of these is itself mediated. This is the import, directly, of the A.B. Cook IV letters. And indeed, of the ways in which the different correspondents write of the same event: each version can only be verified by direct reference to the original. But this direct reference is impossible, as Jacob Horner demonstrates

In the evening of October 4, 1955, two years before Sputnik happy birthday Frederic Remington, as an exercise in Scriptotherapy you Began an account of your Immobility, Remobilisation, and Relapse, entitled WHAT I DID UNTIL THE DOCTOR CAME. By means that you have not yet Discovered (your Manuscript was lost, with certain of the Doctor's files, in the move from Pennsylvania to New York), this account became the basis of a slight novel called THE END OF THE ROAD (1958), which ten years later inspired a film, same title, as false to the novel as was the novel to your Account and your Account to the actual Horner-Morgan-Morgan triangle as it might have been observed from either other vortex.<sup>14</sup>

Our only evidence is the linguistic construction.

As D'Haen writes

In its denial of the existence of any meaningful reality beyond the level of verbalisation LETTERS refutes all claims of the realistic novel to be faithfully re-presenting reality as mere pretence. ... By making America see how the realities it lives by are not objective truths but verbal projections, Barth confronts his society with its own methods of mythologising and perpetuating itself.<sup>15</sup>

These methods include history (specifically the history of late-eighteenth century to early nineteenth century America - no idle choice for a long-standing liberal such as Barth, for this is the period towards which the Reagan administration looks for much of its ideological rhetoric), the history of literature, the making of films, etc.

However, in a gesture characteristic of postmodernism, Barth is not solely concerned with methods of communication but also with communicating. That is, the novel contains within itself a huge architecture of plot and narrative thematic scheme. Thus Schulz can summarise the book succinctly, if a little too neatly, as follows

(1) The revolutionary and counter-revolutionary impulses of America and Europe the past three hundred years and the radical and counter-reactive movements of the 1960s have combined to initiate a new sexually liberated, politically activist, and self-consciously plural society.

(2) The formal Aristotelian modes of the pre-twentieth century European novel and the experimental fictional period of the Modernists have been merged to realise a new postmodernist form for that subject matter.

(3) And the epistolary exchanges between Lady Amherst, Ambrose, et al. and the "Author"/Barth about the state of America and of American letters, and about the progress of LETTERS, has been given imitative form to it all.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth holding this passage before us for a while before turning to discuss the method I have adopted for coming to grips with the novel. My caveat about neatness is given impulse by a suspicion that the novel is so self-

consciously pluralist that any attempt at a pithy description of it, whilst being formally correct, is of necessity drained even of descriptive power by the book's enormous wealth of content. It is, not only, a 'rich tapestry' of life but also a 'rich tapestry' of letters and any attempt to circumscribe that content is bound to lead to a reductive account of the book. Perhaps the only defence that can be offered of any account is that it is less incomplete!

One of the advantages of the epistolary form for Barth is the apparent displacement of the author from the position of sole producer of limits upon the text. Eagleton's above-quoted analysis of Richardson's method includes reference to the tendentious summaries of the contents of the letters and the way in which this permitted the author to re-assume the place of source of metalanguage, of a privileged origin of definitive information about the text. For Barth, this sly re-introduction of authorial dominance is unacceptable and the role of metalinguist is fragmented and distributed amongst the correspondents, one of whom is the 'Author'. The structuration of the novel, its complete design, becomes a challenge to the ontology of realist fiction because the author is not simply displaced from a position of dominance in Letters; he is replaced by a polyphony of voices who come together to produce the complete text.

The events which groups of correspondents have in common demonstrate (again) the relativism which is built into the text. Just as the author has been displaced from the position of origin, so each of the correspondents is

increasingly presented as being the possessor of only a very partial understanding of the whole picture. Rather than being presented with one account which, although we recognise its limitations, even its falsity, we accept because it is the only version available to us, here we are given a series of accounts of an event and are invited to make a judgement as to the 'reality' which lies behind the textual fabrication. At the same time, though, the opacity of the text reminds us that 'reality' is, here, constructed of words which act as reality. This double movement, whereby the existence of a reality beyond language is both asserted and interrogated, is part of the synthetic intention of the text. Realism asserts the pre-linguistic existence of material reality, modernism asserts that our perception of that reality is so shaped by language that we can have no access to that reality other than through language itself; postmodernism in the shape of Letters argues both positions and the range of compromises between at various points in its development.

But Barth's fear that television and film have supplanted language as the medium by which perception is shaped leads him to attack film-makers within the plot, to launch a series of blistering asides at the whole process of film-making (no doubt prompted in part by his experience of the filming of The End of the Road which bore as little resemblance to the book as had the book to, etc.!), and, finally, to assert language and its natural consequence literature as the medium through which 'reality' can be perceived.

This last point is allied to the understanding that this means asserting a minority art-form as primary. There is no embarrassment about this, just as there is no embarrassment about remobilising characters from previous works for this volume, and thus confirming its status as a work for a small audience. The self-consciously difficult design of the book contributes still further to this movement and, at the same time, reminds us that Barth is an American author: unsure of his audience and thus almost wilfully defining the boundaries within which that audience has to fall before it can attempt his work.

This procession of difficulties, once surmounted, serves to remind us of the plurality and openness of the text and thus of the fashion in which the reader is propelled into an active position, because it is only via an *engagement* with the novel that its meanings are generated in the interaction between text and reader. The author, that commander of the single interpretation, has withdrawn behind a veil to become the 'hidden god' of fiction. This is Barth's literature of replenishment, his postmodernism.

The main body of this chapter will be devoted to an examination of the seven sections into which Letters is divided, in an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which the text takes up the themes I have outlined above.



The novel, then, opens in a fashion characteristic of its overall structure, with seven letters, one from each of the correspondents, which appear in reverse chronological order but in the correct alphabetical order according to the acrostic which is the design of the whole text. The correct arrangement of letters on the page is more important than the demands of linearity and chronology within the plot.<sup>17</sup> Barth signalled the importance of this in an interview with Angela Gerst:

G: Let's begin with its title.

B: LETTERS. Seven caps, please. Subtitled *An old time epistolary novel by seven fictitious drolls & dreamers, each of which imagines himself actual*. Eighty-seven lower-case letters plus an ampersand.

G: "... each of *which* ..."?

B: Unavoidable. *Whom* doesn't have enough letters.

G: To total eighty-eight?

B: And to put the g of *imagines* in the right position in a certain pattern, an alphabetical acrostic. Don't ask. Perfectly clear in the novel.<sup>18</sup>

What is clear is that the seventh letter to appear in the book has as its initial the letter G, the seventh letter of the alphabet, and that the acrostic has been arranged such that the previous six letters have as their initials, in order, A,B,C,D,E,F. At the very beginning of the novel, the letters are in the right order.

That it is the seventh letter is also important, in that the text abounds with the importance of sevens - days, months, correspondents, Germaine's vision, stages within stages of the courtship, etc. - and also because it is the letter with which the novel 'begins': "LETTERS is 'now' begun" being its epigraph. It also connects to Ambrose's last letter, with its procession of alphabetical correspondences:

G = the self-existent

...

Germaine, Germaine: *je t'aime, je t'aime!*

...

Goals: grace, Grail, *Götterdämmerung*<sup>12</sup>

The subject-matter and positioning of this letter, then, makes it an entrance to the text, to its chronological span and to the multiplicity of its structuration. As we read, this carefully placed letter tells us, we must be aware of both syntagmatic and paradigmatic construction: of linear design, actual pattern, and overarching connection, as they bind the text together.

This opening emphasis on the placing of letters serves to remind us of the importance that letters, in so many senses of the word, will play in the novel. Alphabetical letters and written messages are the building blocks of this work of letters, which has as one of its concerns its own relationship to the realm of literature ('letters'). And then, there is the importance of the role of letters in the actual narrative of the text. They are not only the mechanisms by which everything in the text is transmitted to the reader, they are also frequently central parts of the plots which these letters spell out. "False letters, doctored letters, concealed or misdirected letters. Letters consigning the bearer to death (they're called "Bellerophonitic letters" in the trade). Letters crossed in the mails."<sup>13</sup>, Barth tells us, are all part of what the book is about.

The other things which Barth describes as being part of the novel are as follows

the three sense of *letters*, and the word-versus-image business, and Can the old girl bear one more offspring at this advanced hour of the world, and if so will it be a monster or what.

Madame de Staël's own fifth and last child was unfortunately imbecilic. She and her young husband called it *Petit Nous*, pretended it was American, and invented fictitious U.S. parents for it ... The doctoring of the documents of history ... 1969. 1812. the genocide of aboriginal Americans. The French and American revolutions. Revolutions, recyclings, and reenactments generally. The compulsion to repeat: its hazards and possibilities. Um: "second cycles" in our lives and histories. The Tragic View of Everything, including of the tragic view ... The passions of the human heart. Second chances. Lost loves, last loves. Language; the novel itself. God bless novels, .. Room to swing a cat in!<sup>21</sup>

This list is not, of course, by any means exhaustive but it does act as an indication that the novel will attempt to create its own fictive universe and that by doing so it indicates the break away from that paralysing sense which afflicted Chimera. It gathers content into itself and processes it into plot and narrative through a series of extremely sophisticated structural devices. The two aspects work in harmony with one another.

To return, then, to this opening group of seven letters. They act as a general prologue to the whole work, introducing each of the correspondents in turn, and as such they act as the frame for the tales to come. Germaine Gordon Pitt Lady Amherst's letter (excluding its postscript) is, in this sense, the pestilence afflicting Florence (in the Decameron), the pilgrimage to Thomas à Beckett's tomb (in The Canterbury Tales), the delay in building the bridge over the Gare (in the Heptameron) - it is the occasion which permits the telling of the tales. But there is one major difference between this frame and the others I have cited. It does not act to bind the characters together as a self-conscious company. Thus, they are seen to have no common purpose and such connections as there are between them will be established

by the forward motion of the plot. The unavoidable corollary of this is the collapse of any organic community and, along with it, of any agreed social purpose. The characters here will choose their alliances as they move through the text, and whether this is part of the disintegration of community in contemporary America or a celebration of a pluralistic society is one of the thematic questions that vibrate below the surface of the text.

The symbolic marker of this question within the text is the Tower of Truth, of which Josephine Hendon has written

Virtually all Barth's characters in Letters find their fate tied to the fate of American culture. They are mysteriously connected with the aesthetic ideals embodied - and heartily travestied - by a Tower of Truth. Newly erected, but already cracking at the foundation, the Tower stands in the wetlands of Maryland on the campus of Marshyhope College. A subject of faculty fights and much bitter factionalism, the future of the Tower stands (sinks) between those who wish it to represent what is best in American art and those who wish it to signal the college's (country's) traditional commitment to the training of farmers and technicians. Will it be a cultural beacon, or break up? Will the study of culture beat out utility? Will anyone know the difference?<sup>222</sup>

These questions are, in turn, given a double focus by the fact that 1969 (the year in which the work is set) and 1979 (the date of publication) are neatly bifurcated by 1974 - the symbolic date identified as the end of the post-war economic and social boom and the beginning of the downward slide into crisis. At one end of this ten-year spectrum stands what the liberal Barth would identify as the excesses of radicalism and at the other the excesses of conservatism. It is no accident that at the end of the

novel it is Todd Andrews, the arch conciliator, who is left in possession of the Tower.

In keeping with the traditions of frames and tales, Germaine's hand-written post-script to her letter to John Barth, Esq., Author, setting the narrative in motion, is of considerably greater length than that which occasions it. Its other important purpose is structural and thematic in that it introduces from the very beginning the idea of layered and partial communication into the text. Germaine wishes to keep certain information secret from her secretary - a conservative spy in the liberal camp - and thus shifts to hand written manuscript.

The sense of partiality this introduces is crucial to the novel as a whole for two reasons. First, we as readers generate meanings by making connections between the letters which are unavailable to the individual correspondents (including, ironically and paradoxically, the 'author'). Thus, we and not the 'author' have the illusion that we are the constructors of any metalanguage that might exist in the text. But, secondly, we must take the reverse of this to heart. Namely, that what we have before us as the text is only a partial account. Particular letters which should, logically, be included are not here - Todd's replies to Jacob, Jerome Bray's initial epistles. This logic, however, is the logic of realism and the structure of this text is, in certain ways, 'high modernist' in that it imposes an order onto the text which engenders specific significant structures. This double motion is part of the synthetic mode of writing towards which Barth claimed to be working in The

Literature of Replenishment, in which the omniscient realist author coexists with the 'Barthesian' active reader in a multiple text.

The second letter, Todd's first, continues with these thematic introductions in its presentation of the slogan '*Praeteritas futuras fecundant*'. Todd's discussion of this idea prefigures the manner in which much of the novel is devoted to demonstrating the various ways in which this relationship operates. His four posited translations -

the future is enriched by the past...

the past manures the future ...

the future grows out of the past...

the past craps up on the future<sup>23</sup>

act as the four positions which demarcate not only the characters' attitude to history but also the way in which that history affects and influences the present. These attitudes have obvious corollaries in the characters' social attitudes, as the cynical/romantic Todd's rejection of "the past is the seedbed of the future" as an adequate translation demonstrates.

With Jacob Horner's opening letter the reader is introduced to another form of communication. The letter couched as a diary entry and containing references to scriptotherapy guides our attention to the enclosed nature of this form of writing. It is produced by a doctored male who is incapable of transmission of either fertile semen or information to other characters. We, the readers, are his audience and, to some extent, this places us in the position of metalinguist; with access to

information unavailable to the characters and thus in a position of authority. This is *one* of the positions which the reader occupies within the text and it is the multiplicity which is important. At other points in the text, the reading strategy will be different.

The reiteration of the substance of The End of the Road and the story of the subsequent history of the manuscript introduce another important thematic line. Writing becomes our only access to past events, and the process of moving from actuality to text involves such distortions that one's access to those events is so heavily mediated by the text that that access is placed in doubt. Thus, the possibility of language as the generator of significance is presented by Joe Morgan's demand that

You're going to Rewrite History, Horner, he declared: the same, clear, still voice that had terminated your Last Conversation with him, in 1953. You're going to Change the Past. You're going to bring Rennie Back to Life.<sup>24</sup>

This sets before the reader the possibility of the action of language changing the past. If, through the medium of writing, patterns of significance can be established then surely the logic of Letters begins to argue at this point that this mechanism can be retroactive. The past is reconstructed because it is written out differently.

Finally, this letter introduces the Anniversary theory of history which acts, as do all the theories, as a mechanism for discovering significance. History operates, according to this view, both horizontally and vertically, and the appearance of the next letter in the novel is made possible by the operation of the vertical dimension. Although written 157 years previous to the narrative

present, it fits into the pattern at this point. The similarity between the simultaneous operation of vertical and horizontal theories of history and Saussure's linguistics, in which meaning is constructed syntagmatically and paradigmatically, should be recognised because it extends to a philosophical agreement about the role of the human subject in the making of history. This is because Barth's view, in the Cooke-Burlingame letters, is that despite the huge and exhilarating efforts of individual subjects to change the course of history, history continues along the teleologically defined route to which we are accustomed. No matter how heroic the effort, it is those characters which accord to the pre-determined structures of history who are the most successful. The Cooke-Burlingames are, at best, tremendous losers; they have no discernible influence on the course of history. The Game of Governments, at which the family play throughout the novel, is a game in which the allegiances of the players, the rules of the game, and even its objectives, are always obscured and always shifting under the impact of language precisely because each one of those individuals cannot have a *significant* impact on the motions of history. This pessimism is a counterweight within the text to the overwhelmingly idealist frame within which the other theories of history present themselves.

Jerome Bonaparte Bray's letter (with enclosures) is in a different register. Although it begins as a contribution to the narrative development, it rapidly becomes the construction of a form of writing far beyond



the aspirations of a synthesis of existing forms. His work, like himself, is a new form and it (and he) act as a threat to the other characters and forms in the work. From his point-of-view, all the others are rampant anti-Bonapartists intent on his downfall because of the future he represents. Whilst we are constantly reminded by the text of the necessity of a shifting point-of-view and of maintaining our multiple perspective on the text, there can be little doubt that Bray is offered as one of the villains of the text - precisely because his radicalism is beyond its synthetic approach. He is in the avant-garde, both fictionally and biologically, and the threat he represents is the threat of non-humanity.

The address and contents of Ambrose's letter identify him as the protagonist of "Water-Message" in Lost in the Funhouse and also as the author of the "obscure, tentative, maverick writings"<sup>25</sup> which, presumably, make up that text. Combined, these factors point to him being the embodiment within the text of a sort of modernism, an experimental fiction which, although in the avant-garde, is not dehumanised in the same way as the works of Bray. His view of Germaine as the "Fair Embodiment of the Great Tradition" and his declaration of love for her set in motion the plot of their courtship which acts as plot pure and simple, a symbol of the possible marriage of pre-modernist and modernist fiction to which Barth theoretically aspires in The Literature of Replenishment, and also as an enactment of the much-reiterated theme of recapitulation which circulates through the work in different fashions.

It is only now that we arrive at the 'beginning' of the novel. I have already discussed the ambiguities which Barth identifies in the use of that word at this point and it is now, I hope, clear how this initial ordering of the letters displaces the 'Author' from the position of metalinguist. That the characters are represented by texts, rather than by their presence, makes it still more possible to overthrow the 'metaphysics of presence' by which, Derrida argues, speech is prioritised over writing. What exists here is the letter, before which there is no pre-existence. The text brings the events into being.

Hence

every letter has two times, that of its writing and that of its reading, which may be so separated, even when the post office does its job, that very little of what obtained when the writer wrote will still stand when the reader reads. And to the units of epistolary fiction yet a third time is added: the actual date of composition, which will not likely correspond to the letterhead date, a function more of plot or form than of history.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the text and its place in the work are prioritised over the speaker/writer. Secondly, by drawing a parallel between this novel and cinema -

Gentles all: LETTERS is now begun, its correspondents introduced and their stories commencing to entwine. Like those films whose credits appear after the action has started, it will now pause.<sup>27</sup>

- Barth introduces another of the important themes of the book; the parallels and divergences between different media. In terms of the plot, this is exemplified by the exchanges between Reggie Prinz and Ambrose Mensch. Within the patterns of the text, the presentation of numerous discourses (and the interactions between them) operates in the same way.

The Author's next is, presumably, addressed with particular reference to Ambrose Mensch (the only other letter in the novel written to 'whom it may concern' is from the latter to the former) and, through the story of the concentric dreams, offers an account of the sources of the present text - of the impulses which gathered together in March, 1969 to act as the foundation for Letters. These first two letters by the 'Author' offer a second frame for the text, which is written between this 'unconscious' description of its sources and the presentation of its (overly) conscious pattern. The first dream clearly refers to Bray - one needs only to look at the latter's account of the purpose of *Aedes sollicitans* in biting visitors to the marshes - and intimates, for the first time, that Bray was the author of "Bellerophoniad" in Chimera. The second dream purports to be an analysis of the first but is itself dreamed and attempts to link, through the metaphor of a Rip Van Wincklesque sleep, the 2nd revolution of 1812 to the 2nd revolution of the post-war period.

This links both the production of The Sot-Weed Factor (an eighteenth century novel written in the twentieth century), as an impulse, and the two historical periods, as a source of significant parallels, to the production of Letters. The third dream identifies Ambrose Mensch as the author of "Perseid" and also collects up a vast range of material (both obvious and arcane) as sources of inscribed meaning for the novel.

The post-script to this second authorial letter gathers all this material into the conscious world and

explains the waking mould into which all this data from the unconscious, dreaming, mind will be poured -

LETTERS: an old time epistolary novel by seven fictitious drolls & dreamers, each of which imagines himself actual. they will write always in this order: Lady Amherst, Todd Andrews, Jacob Horner, A.B. Cook, Jerome Bray, Ambrose Mensch, the Author. Their letters will total 88 (this is the eighth), divided unequally into seven sections according to a certain scheme: see Ambrose Mensch's model, postscript to Letter 86 (Part S, p. 769). Their several narratives will become one; like waves of a rising tide, the plot will surge forward, recede, surge further forward, recede less far, et cetera to its climax and denouement.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the design of the text is no secret; it is foregrounded in a fashion reminiscent of the discussions in Chimera on the relationship between form and content. It is an overtly self-conscious revelation of the mechanisms whereby the text became/becomes written.

In this opening section, then Barth performs the task of laying the foundations for the rest of the novel. The characters, the themes, and the construction of the text are presented to the reader. And, if one takes the analogy of the Tower of Truth and its building, the rest of the novel stands or falls according to how well these foundations have been prepared. As Barth wrote

There is the occasional work that becomes a kind of sacred document, one which is read time and again, but most works have to get their point and pleasures across at a first reading. Now this has led me to a sort of operating principle about the degree of complexity a writer can hazard. The principle is; as long as one works hard to keep his work interesting and literate, he needn't become unduly worried about whether the reader will command all the complexities of the novel ... such compositions had better be ravishing the first time through. If so, the listener will become enthused and curious and will return to the piece again and again. He will examine the score and will see that a hell of a lot is going on that he didn't catch the first time through.<sup>29</sup>

The April letters, building on these initial foundations, begin to extend and deepen the complexities of the entangled plot-lines of Letters as a whole. This function, to a large degree, is fulfilled by the letters as separate entities, each one having as its task the ever-greater elaboration of its individual plot and story. The onus is on the reader to make significant meanings out of the interrelations of the elements. At the same time, this second section, in its design, brings an important question of reading strategy to the fore - namely, in what order does the reader read the letters?

Barth, taking to heart the dictum he himself quotes from Evelyn Waugh - 'never apologise, never explain' - is evasive on this point. When asked by Charlie Reilly

Nabokov's Pale Fire contains elaborate instructions about how its oddly-packaged contents should be read: the madman-narrator insists his 'commentary' should be read at least twice before the real narrative is considered. Granted you're neither insane nor a Nabokovian creation, you have produced a stunningly complex meta-narrative. How should the reader read it? Should he or she follow each of your seven letterwriters seriatim, or simply turn one page after another?<sup>30</sup>

Barth replied

I daresay the best way to read Letters is by beginning with page one, and proceeding to page two, and continuing to the last page. But you're right; it's not that simple. there are letters responding to other letters that the reader hasn't seen yet, and that occurs because I'm convinced there is a nice dramatic effect achieved by departing from chronological order. On the other hand, I don't think much is lost if the reader devises his own method and sticks to it.<sup>31</sup>

This structure, in which replies to letters appear up to 100 pages before the letter in response to which they are written, emphasises the active role of the reader - to make sense of this second section (especially) it is necessary to read the text in (at least) two ways

simultaneously; by page number and chronologically. That this is, in turn, simultaneously reminiscent of both Tom Jones and Julio Cortazar's Hopscotch is entirely appropriate because it reminds us that Letters is an attempt to synthesise pre-modernist and modernist forms. This 'double reading' foregrounds the question of communication and the mechanisms whereby it operates, no more so than at the points at which information is delivered to the reader but the reasons for this delivery are, as yet, unknown.

Germaine's second series of letters have these questions of communication in their foreground. She answers a query as to the whereabouts of 'L Street, Dorset Heights' some 130 pages (and 24 hours) before the question is asked. Her supplying of information is not dependent upon requests for its submission. This motion enables her to discover in the silent author a confidante to whom she can reveal herself (and as such he occupies the position of device in her work). That discovery, combined with Germaine de Stael's words (to her lover Narbonne), "Apparently, everything I believed I meant to you was a dream, and only my letters are real"<sup>32</sup>, produces her letters. These diaristic letters to an apparently absent recipient are exemplary of a particular kind of communication in which the revelatory nature of the act of writing is crucial. The necessary preface to these revelations is her previous history, which is also delivered to the author (and the reader) in this sequence.

It is worth pausing to consider some of the detail of this account for it quite clearly indicates the ways in

which Germaine is part of the 'great tradition' of literature. Her sexual and platonic relationships with the 'greats' and her opinions of their writing present the reader with a version of twentieth-century literature that is very akin to Barth's presentation of history; the creation of a world very close to, and yet oddly at variance with, accepted notions and theories. Hence her story of Hermann Hesse and the ending of Der Glasperlenspiel. Hence, also her meeting with André Castine at the house of Stein and Toklas. The privileging of Stein's menage over Joyce's offers us, in passing, a different version of the history of modernism.

And, through André's conception of

the idea of putting these 'traditional' genres behind him entirely, in favour of what he called (and this was 1939/40!) 'action historiography': the making of history as if it were an avant-garde species of narrative.<sup>33</sup>

we come very close to the purpose of the historical accounts which occupy so much of the novel's bulk. The Burlingame-Cooke-Castine axis in the novel is both a version of 'action historiography' and also the writing of that history. By treading the line between art and reality, between historiography and hagiography, these passages force the reader to construct ontologies which take account of the possible interchangeability of the terms. This whole question of the connection between history and its writing, between events and their description, between reality and art, is still further complicated thus

Thus has chronicling transformed the chronicler, and I see that neither Werner Heisenberg and Jacob Horner went far enough: not only is there no 'non-disturbing observation'; there is no non-

disturbing historiography. Take warning, sir: to put things into words works changes, not only upon the events narrated, but upon their narrator. She who saluted you pages past is not the same who closes now, though the name we share remains,

As ever,  
Germaine<sup>34</sup>

Keeping this in mind as we read is vital if we are to come close to the kaleidoscopic purpose of this fiction and its celebration of relativism in several forms. Not only is our vision of events altered as we read various versions of them, but the act of inscription also alters the *writer's* perceptions.

The final element of her letters is the proximity of sexual and literary activity. This culminates, first and simply, with the reading of A.B. Cook IV's doggerel verse during their first coition and, secondly, with Ambrose's demand that Germaine write down the opening sentences of novels by various of her previous acquaintances from the world of letters (respectively H.G. Wells Tono-Bungay, Hermann Hesse The Glass Bead Game, Aldous Huxley Brave New World, Evelyn Waugh Brideshead Revisited, Thomas Mann The Magic Mountain, James Joyce Finnegans Wake) whilst being bugged by Ambrose. This is a process which concludes with her orgasm as she writes down the opening words of 'Arthur Morton King's' Perseid. The double infertility at this moment - writing down the words of other writers and engaging in anal intercourse - prefigures her later doubts about her communication with the author and her ability to have children.

Todd Andrews's letter, filling in as it does the space between the end of The Floating Opera and the narrative present, fulfils very much the same function as



Germaine's earlier letter and also allows Todd, through his definition of the relationship between the past and the future to make a contribution to the thematic debate about the role of history within the construction of the present culture.

while the Present does not exist (it being merely the conceptual razor's edge between Past and Future), at the same time it's all there is: the Everlasting Now between a Past existing only in memory and a Future existing only in anticipation.<sup>35</sup>

The Horner and Cook letters have much the same function, acting to expand and elucidate both the private histories of characters with whom we are already familiar from our reading of the previous novels and also to add sufficient complication and connection to the present narrative so as to maintain the interest of a reader unaware of the earlier works. The first surge forward of the plot is over, and this is a period of consolidation and preparation for the next move.

But they are not simply that, for in the Cook letters, Barth is acting as the novelist of history - making from history a narrative appropriate to the world he inhabits. This takes him close to the dilemma he faced in The Sot-Weed Factor; namely, that actuality can outdo the most fertile imagination. And although he asserts that

I have every confidence that anyone who has an authoritative knowledge of Napoleonic history, the War of 1812, or those other convulsions ... will find some howlers in my pages.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the most outrageous moment in the first of the two epistles - the point at which the evidence of Pontiac's death is given by a character named Pierre Menard! - is verified by Francis Parkman's The Conspiracy of Pontiac<sup>37</sup>.

However, the most important thing about these letters in terms of the whole book's structure is the introduction of Joel Barlow. His Columbiad acts as a marker for Letters. Written between the two revolutions it is an account of the possibilities of America just as Letters, written before Jerome Bray's Second Revolution, is a similar reflection on such matters. Furthermore, when placed alongside Rogers's Ponteach; or the savages of America - "an account of Indian wrongs and sufferings"<sup>33</sup> - it marks out the parameters of the American novel in the years of its inception. The subsequent schema developed by critics of American literature, in which writing in America vacillates between the garden and the wilderness, between possibility and its thwarting, is a debate obviously taken up in Letters. And surely it can be no coincidence that, just as the Columbiad finishes with Columbus being shown the future of America from a high place so, too, Letters finishes on top of a tower. The irony is that one finished with an expression of optimism for the future whilst the other ends with the big bang. And, if we pursue this line for one moment, and press the biblical parallel of the Columbiad's high place, the Tower can also be seen as the Tower of Babel. In this way, and in the connections he weaves between writing and diplomacy (between plots), Joel Barlow becomes one of the major strings which holds this vast bundle together.

Both Bray and Mensch, in their letters, reveal themselves to be the authors of earlier works by Barth; Bray, of "Bellerophoniad" and Mensch, of several of the stories in Lost in the Funhouse. Both of these texts,

then, represents an alternative mode of writing; they are one of the pairs of Scylla and Charybdis between which the text must negotiate its way. They are paired because, of course, they are both autobiographical texts. In one, the author literally becomes the text whilst in the other the parallel between author and text dwells in the parallel between

the life of the book (Lost in the Funhouse) ... and the double growth (Bildungs and Kunstler) of Ambrose as individual and author.<sup>39</sup>

The author's four letters are devoted to the continuing debate on the ontology of fiction. Hence, the 'budding irrealist' who discovers the existence of a character from an earlier fiction in the 'reality' of the present one is moved to exclaim

I wanted no models in the real world to hobble my imagination. If, as the Kabbalists supposed, God was an author and the world his book, I criticised him for mundane realism .. I approach reality these days with more respect, if only because I find it less realistic and more mysterious than I'd supposed.<sup>40</sup>

This second section, then, operates at two complementary levels. First, at the level of plot it begins to sketch out the ways in which the stories of the characters intermesh. In terms of simply keeping the reader turning pages this is important, as it holds out the promise that the text will coalesce into a coherent, if deeply complex, whole. Secondly, it begins to establish thematic patterns which are played out both in the plots of the novel and in the novel as a whole.

Two themes are vital to the novel. Josephine Hendon's previously-quoted comments on the connections between the fates of the characters and the fate of American culture

are correct, but they don't go far enough. Letters presents characters whose responses to past, present, and future, to possibility and its thwarting, must be taken as a complex whole rather than as a simplistic statement of a single position into which the character has been fixed in the (non-existent) pre-social origins. These responses set out the parameters within which the thematic patterns of American writing have developed. In that sense the novel surpasses its predecessors in Barth's work because it establishes a dialectic between (for example) the 'nay-sayers' and the 'yea-sayers' of the nineteenth century. The second theme is intimately related to this, in that it discusses the ways in which these responses are written out. Hence the novel's wide field of registers and tones: these present the stylistic and linguistic parameters within which the writing takes place. So, the novel implicitly discusses not only responses to the 'monuments' of history and culture but also the ways in which these responses have been reproduced through language.

Germaine's five letters in the third section continue her account of the events of May 1969, and of her more distant past. Her postscript to the fourth letter indicates the rationale behind her rapidly increasing production.

when I aspired to fiction I would sit for hours blocked before the inkless page. And my editorial, my critical and historical writing, has never come easily, nor shall I ever be a ready dictator of sentences to Shirley Stickles. Even my personal correspondence is usually brief. But this genre of epistolary confession evidently strikes some deep chord in me: come Saturday's Dear J., my pen races, the words surge forth.<sup>41</sup>

She has moved from the formality of her opening letter into a confessional mode and her discourse is becoming appropriate to her character and her role in the book in a fashion similar to the process through which all the characters will pass.

Taken as a whole these five letters have a series of purposes. First, they continue the story of her relationship with André Castine from her affair with 'Juliette Recamier' to her arrival at Marshyhope. In the course of this tale, she confirms her brief stay at the Remobilisation Farm (alluded to in Jacob Horner's April letter) and thus takes a step closer to being the core of the novel by becoming connected to another of the threads of plot which run through the work. As well all this, the debate on the motives of the Burlingame-Cooke-Castine lineage in history is further elaborated, and she reveals the means by which the A.B. Cook IV letters became included in the text of Letters. This is important, for it emphasises the confusion of motives and actions crucial in the Game of Governments -

supposing the letters to be genuine, one may still suspect them to to be disingenuous. Had Andrew IV really changed his mind about his father's ultimate allegiance, or was he merely pretending to have done so, for ulterior reasons? Was his avowed subversiveness a cover for subverting the real subversives? And might his exhortation to his unborn child have been a provocation in disguise?<sup>42</sup>

Her continuing history acts to bind her not only to to the story of the Mack family (and thus to Todd Andrews) but also to Reggie Prinz and his involvement with Ambrose. The developing tale of the engagement between these two on the film project acts quite clearly as a satirisation of the possibilities of certain narrative forms. If Reggie is described thus -

It is said that he was a brilliant actor and director that has absorbed and put behind him all the ideology of contemporary filmmaking, along with radical politics ... and literature, which he is reputed to have called "a mildly interesting historical phenomenon of no present importance".<sup>43</sup>

- then his fate will surely act as an authorial comment on these ideas. (Especially since Barth has expressed elsewhere his hostility to at least one of the thoughts here). And if this statement seems to contradict my earlier remarks about the absence of a metalanguage controlled by the author of the text then this is because this is a contradictory aesthetic mode, riddled and pocked with all the old assumptions of fiction-making even as it attempts to break free from those ideas. The new is never born complete from the shell of the old.

Finally, the continuing relationship between Germaine and Ambrose has a dual purpose. First, it makes explicit the novel's theme of re-enactment as the lovers match the stages of *their* affair to Ambrose's *previous* affairs. Much of the later progress of the affair is, of

course, consumed with trying to work out the exact correspondences and with attempting to take the step forward into a new and self-sufficient relationship.

This idea, combined with the visit to the Menschaus and the stories of the complex and quasi-incestuous goings-on there, point to another possibility - namely, that the offspring of their relationship will be another Petit Nous, an imbecile child. Angela's place as the 'Dear Damaged Daughter' points to the consequences of incest, and if we regard Letters as a somewhat incestuous marriage of Barth's writings to one another then we may regard this work itself as an imbecile child. But if it grows beyond that re-enactment to become something new and complete in its own right, then it marks the way forward for fiction. Clearly, the course of Germaine and Ambrose's affair begins to become central to the meanings of the whole text.

The overall effect of these letters, in their drawing-together of the disparate strands of the plot, explores practically Barth's view that

I came up with a middle-aged British gentlewoman who had been a lover or intimate of a number of 'big gun' novelists earlier in the century and who was currently marooned in some tenth-rate American college. Despite the unusual nature of the fiction I was putting her into, I wanted to make her as believable as possible. The other characters, to me at least, are clearly ancillary, complementary, supplementary; her voice is the sustaining one. <sup>44</sup>

"Complementary" is the operative word because the other letters continue apace. To take a metaphor from Barth himself, the novelist acts in this text as an orchestrator and draws together a large number of voices. If Germaine is the solo voice, the overall effect of the novel is

symphonic and is sustained by the effective continuation of all the other voices as supporting melodies and counter-harmonies.

Thus, both Todd and Jacob take up the theme of re-enactment, albeit in a sceptical and questioning fashion. For Todd, making love to Jane Mack on the *Osborn Jones* features as 10R on his chart of parallels but he is unsure of its meaning. For Jane, it is "no sweet replay at all"<sup>45</sup>. Perspective is all-important if re-enactment is not to become a formalistic game.

The fourth A.B. Cook IV letter is taken up with a lengthy account of his involvement with Germaine de Staël, Joel Barlow and Tecumseh.<sup>46</sup> Against this historical background the letter takes up the themes of re-enactment and literary versions of historical events. The former is introduced on two occasions. First, by Germaine de Staël's re-performance of her escape from the revolutionary terror disguised as a serving maid and, secondly, by Andree and André's involvement with Tecumseh

what could check it (the US's westward expansion)? Not Tecumseh's daydream of confederating all the Indians from Florida to the Lakes, I scoft: that was but the tragedy of Pontiac replay'd.<sup>47</sup>

The latter draws on Germaine de Staël's theory of

another sort of revolution already under way, tho scarcely yet acknowledged, in all the arts. Its inspirers were her old family friend Rousseau & his German counterparts. Its values were sentiment & sensation as against conscious intellection; it aspired to the rejection or transcension of conventional forms, including the conventional categories of art and social class.<sup>48</sup>

Cook's account of his meeting with 'Consuelo del Consulado', and this account's reception by two other writers, enlarges the debate about the revolution in art



to include the nature of the relationship between art and life. James Fenimore Cooper, who remarks that

the acceptance of 'historical' documents as authentic is also an act of faith - a provisional suspension of incredulity not dissimilar, at bottom, to our complicity with Rabelais, Cervantes, or George III's beloved Fielding.<sup>49</sup>

presents a crucial distinction when he questions "not the verity, but the verisimilitude - that is, the plausibility as fiction - of my account"<sup>50</sup>. This puts an ironic pressure on Cook's comment that Honoré de Balzac's version is "too romantical by half". The future realist's version of the events is more outrageous than the actual history as told by the budding romantic. This, combined with such remarks as "the slowness & unpredictability of the mails, which I am convinced have alter'd & re-alter'd the course of history more than Bonaparte"<sup>51</sup> and with the context of the A.B. Cook IV letters as a whole, presents a theory of history very close to that of The Sot-Weed Factor. And, of course, theories of history have a close parallel to the theme of re-enactment, for both depend upon the recognition and understanding of patterns in the past and how they affect the present.

Cook finishes his summation of his family history with the admonition "Do not restart that old reciprocating engine, our history; do not rebel against the me who am rebelling against myself"<sup>52</sup>. This raises the important question of duplicitousness. That is, do these letters present their author's true opinion about the events or a false version designed to persuade the next generation to follow its parents rather than rebelling against them? We have to allow for this possibility, as the texts before us

are our only evidence; we have to question the motives which would produce texts with these particular contours. This is still furthered complicated by the history of the letters which leads to their appearance. We need to question not only André's motives in sending the letters at this point but also, as Germaine notes, their veracity. If this truth cannot be established then motive becomes opaque. After all, if the letters were written in 1812 the following sentence is anachronistic - "My own mind was less protean than protoplasmic; less a 'shifter of shapes' than a maker of shifts"<sup>53</sup> for the Oxford English Dictionary gives the first use of 'protoplasmic' as Von Mahl, Botanical Zeitung in 1846. It can be no coincidence that this is the only obvious evidence for the letters being forgeries. But perhaps, like Jerome Bonaparte Bray, I am beginning to see messages in even the smallest authorial slip!

The seeing of messages everywhere is, of course, characteristic of Bray. Especially in this third letter's almost obsessive concern with ciphers, anagrams, acrostics and numerology. The bulk of the letter, concerned as it is with the monstrously complex deciphering of the LILYVAC's print-out, is a clear indication of Bray's desire to push the discourse of his mode of experimental writing to its farthest extreme - at which point every text becomes an acrostic of some much vaster text. This method, linked as it is to Bray's madness, is a clear indication to all critics just when to stop their picking of the entrails and, as such, is an appeal to a liberal humanist sensibility. The whole novel parallels the two Germaines

and their experience of literature - experiences which share

a faith in the constitutive power of the imagination, a confidence in the ability of literature to impose order, value and meaning on the chaos and fragmentation of industrial society<sup>54</sup>

- against Bray's extension of this into a madness.

Ambrose's letter is also concerned with re-enactments, particularly of his previous affairs, and the result of his experiences and ponderings here is the theory he presents to Germaine five days later and presented to us, the reader, some 100 pages earlier. It culminates with the following exchange

What I really feel is a mighty urge to go forward by going back, to where things started. Rewind, you know. Rebegin. Replay. That is known as regression, Magda declared; I bid you good night.<sup>55</sup>

Which is, of course, a contribution to the debate on the status of the present work.

This auto-critique of the text is continued in the Author's single letter, which not only continues the theme of re-enactment by giving the latest of his accounts of the germination of a particular previous work, but also concludes

Currently I find myself involved in a longish epistolary novel, of which I know so far only that it will be regressively traditional in manner; that it will not be obscure, difficult, or dense in the Modernist fashion; that its action will occur mainly in the historical present, in tidewater Maryland and on the Niagara Frontier; that it will hazard the resurrection of characters from my previous fiction, or their proxies, as well as extending the fictions themselves, but will not presume, on the reader's part, familiarity with those fictions, which I cannot remember myself in detail. In addition, it may have in passing something to do with alphabetical letters.<sup>56</sup>

By the end of this third section the purposes of the novel as a whole are being more clearly revealed to the correspondents, to the author, and to the reader. The web of interconnections between elements of the plot and versions of the thematic concerns (and between both of these) is being spun ever more tightly.

The fourth section is dominated by Germaine's voice and her letters occupy over half of the total material for June. It is, then, to her that we can turn for the initial account of the month's events in broad outline. In the course of these four letters, three of the major plot lines are drawn together: her affairs with Ambrose, the account of the Burlingame-Cooke-Castine lineage, and the making of Reggie Prinz's film. The first two of these parallel each other in their movement from clarity into confusion. Hence, the transition from stage four to stage five of their affair re-enacts the past but in such a way as for the connections between the two time periods to be unclear. Indeed, the connections will not become clear until the end of the novel. Germaine is subjected to a 'rite of passage', the significance of which is unclear to her. She must, with her readers, endure in ignorance. Similarly, her scholarly doubts as to the authenticity of the A.B. Cook IV letters is replaced by a more pressing confusion as to the identities of the characters which concludes with Monsieur Casteene writing that;

about the same time Deponent moveth to Maryland and setteth up as an arch right-winger named Andrew Burlingame Cook VI, which name is in fact officially his from his father as is the name André Castine from his mother. He modifies his appearance (He can do it almost before one's eyes, but never quite perfectly; then when he 'returns' like Proteus to his 'true' appearance, that's never quite like it was before.<sup>57</sup>

Distinct and separate personalities are beginning to dissolve into a welter in which no-one can be distinguished. Just as, without a definite authorial stance, it is impossible to arrive at an 'objective' account of the events of the novel, without a similarly

definitive stance it is impossible to separate appearance from reality, or textual surface from that which it is describing.

All of this is drawn together in the developing story of Reggie Prinz's film. The capacity of the movie-making to summon characters from a large collection of points within the book into itself indicates that the struggle between Ambrose and Reggie, the "mythicised antithesis of Image and Word"<sup>52</sup>, is another of the whole novel's thematic concerns. And the engagement between narrative modes, played out through the Unwritable Sequence and the Unfilmable Sequence, is not simply at the level of abstract aesthetics - as the following satirical passage reminds us

No question but moviemakers have the world in their pocket in our century, as we like to imagine the 19th-century novelists did in theirs. Let Ambrose ask the skipper of the Original Floating Theatre II to delay his leaving Cambridge for half an hour so that he can make a few notes thereupon for a novel in progress: the chap wouldn't have considered it. But let a perfectly unknown Reg Prinz show up with the camera crews and the vaguest intentions in the world ... the world stops, reenacts itself for take after take, does anything it can imagine its Director might wish of it!<sup>53</sup>

But this is Germaine speaking and the validity of the tone of this statement must be tempered by an awareness of her commitment to the written word and her growing disaffection with the whole film project. The sense of perspective, so important to the relativist organisation of the whole novel, is re-asserted shortly after this damnation of the film by Germaine's realisation that she, too, could be a character in a fiction. Even as she begins to aspire towards the role of metalinguistic voice in the text, she is undermined and reduced to the status of

participant in a performance the form and structure of which elude her.

The parallel between this and Todd's confusion as to how the re-enactments will work out is clear, as is the parallel between both of these and Horner's confusion with Der Wiedertraum and the way in which it fits into the Big Picture. All three play the same melody in different keys. Having established that re-enactment is a possibility, the text now proceeds to demonstrate the problems - both epistemological and ontological - which adhere to that possibility. All three correspondents have a minefield of difficulties through which to find their way so that they can assert the patterns by which their lives have been ordered. After the setting of the situation comes the complications before the text moves towards conclusion. This central section is both the narratological and thematic point at which possibilities are opened up, and it is therefore inevitably a section of confusion and difficulty.

A.B. Cook VI's first letter takes this confusion onto a different plane, in that it replaces one correspondent with another who occupies the same place. With authorship thus placed in doubt he is also free to question the ontological frame of this book, by declaring himself to be the author of The Sot-Weed Factor and a parallel text to Letters itself. But the major part of his letter is given over to carrying the family history through the 19th century and into the 20th. This history divides into two parts. first, the influence of the family not upon history itself but upon literary history - vide the family's

influence over Poe, Whitman, Longfellow, Stowe, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Emerson; in short over the accepted canon of 19th century American writing.

Secondly, Andrew V's anarchist involvement with the Welland Canal debacle, itself a re-enactment of the IRB's attempt on the same canal in 1866 (and also of Todd's encounter with Drew Mack on the Choptank River bridge earlier in the novel, but some 60 years later). This echoing, and the divergent explanations of the explosions, combined with the fact that the code for the detonation is that well-known phrase which combines all the letters of the alphabet, points to the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of deciphering past events through the medium of language. The two themes which predominate through this letter are this proximity of (and the distance between) 'reality' and the literature which attempts to describe it, and the growing pessimism about the individual subject's capacity to influence history as the text moves into the 19th century. Into the realm of realism and way from authorial inventiveness.

Jerome Bray, too, is thrown into disorder in this section but in a very different set of terms. His letter, primarily a demonstration of LILYVAC at work, also shows that his previous propositions for decoding are inapplicable. Thus, Jerome is thrown into despair, not least because he is failing in his heroic task. He is, after all in some ways, an heroic figure: he had a mysterious birth and upbringing and fulfils several of the prerequisites of hero-hood. But he is also working with a recalcitrant computer which RESETS every time a pattern is



detected, presumably because it is attempting to deny the formal and linguistic demands of the old novel.

Ambrose's despair is borne out of doubts as to his daughter's parentage and his loss of eloquence for his Perseus story. He accepts that "the past is a holding tank from which time's wastes recirculate. Nothing lost, alas; all spirals back, recycled"<sup>60</sup> but then asks "How transcend mere reenactment?"<sup>61</sup>. This question is important at three levels: for his affair with Germaine, for the completion of the Perseus story and, by implication, for the whole of Letters. The importance of the first two of these levels is clear internally to the novel and their resolution points towards the possibility of a successful resolution of the whole novel. The third level, occurring as it does at the approximate mid point of the novel ( $427/772 - 431/772 = 0.553 - 0.558$  of the text) and in the fourth of seven sections, indicates the replication and transference of the constantly re-iterated themes of re-enactment and mid-life crises from a thematic onto a structural level in the novel. Thus, in this section come a series of critical moments for the continuation of the novel.

The final letter follows the pattern of crisis and difficulty in its latest description of the novel because of the fear that the work-in-progress may simply be a sequel (that "most fallible of genres") and thus be incapable of living independently of its predecessors. The crisis may come, in part, from the Author's knowledge of Freitag's Triangle and his own position thereon at this moment. He is approaching the necessity of a climax, denouement and resolution, having expounded and

complicated the action thus far. In a novel of this magnitude the insurmountability of such a task is clearly a possibility. Barth alludes to this in his interview with Charlie Reilly. When asked about the difficulties of writing Letters he replied

I felt that the complicated business of maintaining six narratives, along with a seventh authorial voice that serves as commentator and clearing-house, was the most challenging task I had undertaken.<sup>62</sup>

This sense of difficulty in the construction of the text, in the aesthetic being established by the text, becomes part of that text. The making of the textual surface becomes part of that surface.

Given the thematic concerns of the previous section it should come as no surprise that this fifth section contains a letter which breaks the established pattern - Germaine's letter of August 2 appears on the July calendar. The importance of this becomes apparent when we remember Bellerophon's failure to become a hero because of his perfect imitation of patterns. Here, the advance towards successful resolution is marked by the protagonist's use of patterns in a new way. She uses them; she is not used by them. This establishes the importance of formal structure in this text, because formal success precedes resolution within the plot-lines of the novel.

At the same time, the plot advances towards resolution. The story of Ambrose and Germaine passes from the fifth stage of their affair to the burgeoning sixth stage; the movement is from Ambrose's abandonment of his Perseus story - "That hurts, John: it was .. our story, if you know what I mean: Ambrose's and mine"<sup>33</sup> - to his admission of 'concern - well, love'. Overlaid on this are Ambrose's developing passion for Richardson (for the world of letters) and the continuing story of Reggie Prinz's film. The former of this pair culminates on top of the Tower of Truth with the reading of the table of contents of Clarissa as a seduction and in the possible conception of a child.<sup>34</sup> The uncertainty about the conception's success which is crucial to the conclusion of the novel is scrupulously maintained here, with references to death (presumably employed as an analogy to Germaine's menopause as the death of her child-bearing potential), to

a successful conception, and to intercourse with the wrong person, intertwining throughout the passage.

It is also the moment filmed by Reggie Prinz and leads, directly, to Ambrose's felling with the mike-boom and the re-beginning of the engagement between Author and Director. The film, which up until now has re-enacted history, now takes on a further dimension as it begins to re-enact moments from its own making. Hence the Mating Sequence:

the shooting script itself substituted for Clarissa; Bray this time (quite at home in that belfry, I'll wager) to aid the Author's assault on the Director, "their common foe", in the hopes of then eliminating the Author in turn and gaining sole sexual access to ... my stand-in! I.e., Bea, in 1930's costume. Their (simulated) copulation interrupted as ours was on Bastille Day by the Director, who films it with his hand-held and is filmed filming it by the regular crew. The Author to succeed as before in destroying that first film (but with Bray's aid, who I suppose has been hanging by his feet from a rafter, shooting overhead stills) and to retire with his lady in apparent triumph. Whereupon the Director reappears in the empty belfry, surveys without expression the pile of ruined film, reloads his camera, and exits. Lengthy shot of deserted belfry (where's Bray?) to remind viewer that Author's victory is at best ambiguous, since entire scene has been filmed and is being viewed. <sup>65</sup>

In this sense, the film draws closer to the fiction before us as both are seen to be re-enacting events through their own medium and, through that re-shaping, producing significances which are generated by the re-enactment itself. This shifts the relationship between the film and its source material: "Your fiction is at most the occasion of the film these days .. One would not be surprised if the final editing removed all references to your works entirely"<sup>66</sup>.

Finally, with a characteristic sleight-of-hand, Barth elides his earlier project contained in Lost in the Funhouse with the present one by having Germaine comment

I spent the morning poolside rereading your Funhouse stories. On them a word only. A. assures me that you do not yourself take with much seriousness those Death-of-the-novel or End-of-letters chaps, but that you do take seriously the climate that takes such questions seriously; you exploit that apocalyptic climate, he maintains, to reinspect the origins of narrative fiction in the oral tradition. Taking that cue, Ambrose himself has undertaken a review of the origins of printed fiction, especially the early conventions of the novel.<sup>67</sup>

Through the humour and satire of the Reggie Prinz film passages there runs a serious thread which attempts to re-create that 'apocalyptic climate' in which the established media are beginning to break up as forms of communication. In this sense, the comments of the young media types on the battle between the Author and the Director -

in their opinion, that was a quarrel between a dinosaur and a dead horse: television, especially the embryonic technology of co-axial cable television, was the medium that promised to dominate and revolutionise the last quarter of the century.<sup>68</sup>

- and the linking of Jerome Bray to this media later become a serious commentary embedded in the humour of the plot as it develops through these passages.

Todd's letter, in its resolution of a previous problem with re-enactment - that Jane does not remember the significance of their meeting - propels him forward, albeit into the Second Dark Night of the Soul and precipitate old age. The second half of his letter follows this by replaying the now long-past story of the disruption of the Commencement exercises and the subsequent sacking of Germaine. The re-appearance of this incident indicates Todd's being out of synchronisation

with the 'present tense' of the novel - a marker, at the very least, of his sudden aging. But it is also a sign of the vigorous relativism of the novel. What is, for one group of characters, a relatively minor incident is, for Todd, the occasion of the start of his withdrawal from the world and his planning of 13R - the re-enactment of his resolve to destroy The Original Floating Theatre. Having restored the 'original' ending of the text once before (with the second edition of the novel) Todd now plans to restore the 'original' ending within the text by destroying himself.

The sudden arrival of this decision is itself a reenactment of the suddenness of the original decision and also shows the difficulty of reenactment. And is proved by the reenactment, the recapitulation, of a sentence from The Floating Opera: "some things that are perfectly obvious to others aren't obvious at all to me, and vice versa: hence this chapter, hence this book."<sup>69</sup> What is, for one character, a dramatic climax (the pun is intentional) is, for another, a moment of no particular interest. What is, for one character, the end of the novel is an incident passed over by others. What is, in one reading, a central thematic line, is, for another, peripheral. Perspective, both authorial and readerly, is the key to a successful coming-to-terms with this novel.

The lack of synchronisation between original and reenactment is one of the themes of Jacob's letter. The anniversary theory of history continues to operate, but the connection between the past and Der Wiedertraum "is out of synch, out of focus, perhaps out of control"<sup>70</sup>.

This is so because Joe Morgan's version of reenactment is an endless cycle in which events are repeated according to a pattern clear to him but obscured to others. The outcome of Der Wiedertraum, then, could act as a pointer to the consequences of this kind of reenactment and, by implication, this fate could act as an aesthetic basis upon which to make some judgement of the whole novel. Its motivation is so obscured to the reader that its content becomes meaningless.

With A.B. Cook VI's versions of A.B. Cook IV's 'posthumous' letters we shift, again, to a different register of communication. We are removed from the actual text by several stages: they are deciphered from a code similar to that employed by Poe in The Gold Bug, edited by A.B. Cook VI, arranged in a pattern which makes narrative sense but which may also be an order "coincidental, or conformable to some larger pattern unknown to their author"<sup>21</sup>, and they are presented for Henry Burlingame VI's attention for a specific reason. Thus, these letters must be read with a sense not only of their content but also for the purpose underlying their presentation. We read not for a 'faithful' version of actuality but to discover the motives behind the version of the version of events herein presented. We must read the frame within which the letters are set with at least as much attention as the letters themselves.

In this light, the extravagant detail of the letters can be understood. First, it plots the ways in which the actions of the individual are open to a plethora of interpretations; even (or, perhaps, especially) by that

individual. Secondly, it demonstrates the ways in which the public and private interweave as the history of Andrew's journeys coincides with, and casts ironic light on, the history of the same period. Thirdly, it demonstrates the conjuncture between history and literary history, as is demonstrated here by his influence over Consuelo, who re-appears by a coincidental sleight-of-hand which outstrips Fielding or Smollet and fulfils two of Clara Reeve's criteria for the successful fusion of Romance and the novel;

a sufficient degree of the marvellous to excite attention; enough of the manners of real life to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic to engage the heart on its behalf.<sup>72</sup>

Consuelo demonstrates her hopeless confusion of realism and romanticism which culminates in the appearance of Cartas argelinas, o, la Delfina nueva -

a new realismo must inevitably succeed the current rage for the Romantic; to buy into this growth-stock early, so to speak, she has reworked her story to include all manner of ghosts, monsters, witches, curses, and miracles, in whose literal reality she devoutly believes, but which she'd omitted from her first draft as insufficiently romantico, there being none in Delfine, Corinne or The Sorrows of Young Werther.<sup>73</sup>

This literary confusion parallels those of the military campaign, especially at the point when Cockburn destroys all of Joe Gale's uppercase C's - thus destroying capitals whilst destroying a capital. Within the two histories, the real and the literary, intermesh. Hence, also, the death of Joel Barlow at the end of the alphabet.

This sense, of apparently vastly disparate forms of organisation combining to produce a feeling of complete order, is underscored by the exact parallelling of



Andrew's dream on Bloodsworth Island with that of the Author in the same place.<sup>74</sup> Its less precise reference back to Ebenezer Cooke's epiphanic moment on the island in The Sot-Weed Factor adds to a sense of an underlying pattern behind the events. This pattern is itself suggested by Jerome Bray in his abstract of Backwater Ballads. It also suggests one particular form of organisation as crucial, namely that of the authorial imagination, because it is capable of synthesising the other forms of organisation into a coherent and credible whole. It is, in microcosm, the whole novel's attempt at a synthesis of novelistic forms.

Jerome Bray's letter, and its vigorous rejection of the Author's invitation acts to remind us of the relativity of interpretation. His version of events which we have already read is, of course, as valid as any other but is radically at odds with the others - not least because of the language in which it is couched. The reader is alienated from Bray's position by both the alien discourse with which he works and also by that towards which he works: i.e., Numerature! (14211351812021185!). This is indicated by the fact that he has been led

into vain decipherment of LILYVAC's numbers, in order to purge us of our last illusion about RN: that it was to be a revolutionary work of literature (and, ipso facto, no more than a literary work of revolution).<sup>75</sup>

This revolutionary position makes him a potential and growing threat to other forms of communication - not only to fiction but to film as well - as is shown by his attitude to Ambrose and Reggie.

The relativism so important to a reading of Letters is present, too, in Ambrose's letter, which tells of his days on Bloodsworth Island with Bea Golden/Jeannine Mack. What was, for Germaine, simple infidelity is, for Ambrose, a reenactment of his previous affair and is curiously obscure on the question of motive. His summary of events, and projections of the future acts as a counterpoint to Germaine's account of the same.

The Author's letters to Bray and Horner are designed to make the connection between author and character more problematic by presenting variations on the relationship between author and character. Just as, previously, the author has been concerned to overturn the existing ontological relation between author and character in realism, now he is concerned to overturn his overturning but without returning to the prior model.

The Author's reply to Jerome Bray operates as the offering of (both correct and false) clues to both this novel and previous works. Coming at the end of the fifth of seventh sections it is clearly important for the continuation of the work in hand. "By perfectly imitating the pattern of mythic heroism one may become not a mythic hero but merely a perfect imitation"<sup>76</sup> is surely a reference to the dilemma faced by Bellerophon in "Bellerophoniad". "That one might cunningly aspire neither to perfect nor to revolutionise the flawed genre of the novel, say, but to imitate perfectly its flaws"<sup>77</sup> is equally surely an indication of the differences between Bray's and the Author's projects. The references to Bellerophon indicate the crucial difficulty with

reenactment; that it degenerates into a mere perfect imitation of a work - a counterfeit. With the failure of Bellerophon in mind the question of the way forward beyond reenactment begins to centrally important to the rest of the novel.

Parenthetically, at the phi-point of Letters (in terms of pages) is the question

Can a played-out old bag of a medium be fertilised one last time by a played-out Author in a played-out tradition?<sup>7e</sup>

That it is possible to discover this is due either to coincidence or over-cunning on the author's part, or (and I believe this to be the case) that postmodernism in general (and Letters in particular) places such demands on the reader to generate meanings that such interpretations are produced by the process of reading. That realisation is, perhaps, the dramatic climax of the phi-point (in terms of sections) of Letters.

With the next, penultimate, series of letters from Germaine various strands of the plot are advanced to a considerable degree. First, the ongoing struggle between Author and Director, re-enacting as it does the confused and inconclusive events of the 1812 war, is further complicated by the overt emergence of Jerome Bray as the Medium of the Future. He is 'the foe who will ally them'<sup>73</sup>; namely, television, and he brings the filming to an abrupt halt with the explosion which showers the crew with the pages of NUMBERS. The import of this is clear. Whatever one makes of the antagonistic contradictions between film and literature they are surpassed and overturned by the advent of this new revolutionary medium. But also, precisely at the moment at which this is made clear, he disappears, leaving the original antagonisms intact and still to be played out.

These antagonisms, in many ways, reach a dramatic climax (although I use this word advisedly here, given the book's insistence upon the possibility of climaxes within climaxes, etc.) at the Script Conference when the Buffalo underground film newsletter asks

Can a played-out bag of a medium be fertilised one last time by a played-out Author in a played-out tradition?<sup>74</sup>

This is clearly apposite at two levels. First, it makes sense of, not only Ambrose's projects but also the novel as a whole - one shortly discovers that Ambrose is working on

a fiction on the form of a letter or letters to the Author from a Middle-aged English Gentlewoman and Scholar in Reduced Circumstances, Currently Embroiled in a Love Affair with an American Considerably Her Junior<sup>75</sup>

Secondly, it applies equally obviously to the course of Ambrose and Germaine's relationship. That the question of Germaine's pregnancy is left unresolved at the end of the novel is appropriate because the question of Letters's success as a novel cannot be answered by itself.

The relationship itself, having passed through the re-enactment of Ambrose's previous affairs, is now engaged in re-enacting itself

if we now put by our heavy humping for a spell of Chaste Reciprocal Affection, then week 3 of this happy 6th stage of ours would echo stage 3 of our affair (approximately May) itself an echo of his chaste "3rd affair". (Moreover it was, I now recalled, at about this juncture in our affair that we began to realise how ontogeny, so to speak, was recapitulating its phylogeny.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, Germaine writes asking the Author which of his works she is to read next, having worked her way through his published oeuvre. The ontological confusions at this point are manifold, and designed to force us to question the epistemological structures with which we normally engage when reading fiction.

At all three of these levels, then, August is a month of inconclusion for Germaine; a month in which matters are pushed forward but towards no apparent conclusion. Even Andrea's death-bed last words are inconclusive. All of this is, perhaps, best explained by the following passage

A month ago I'd have been appalled at the notion of his even reading them [her letters to the Author], not to mention using them. Now ... I find I don't really mind. They do spell out something of a story, don't they, with a sort of shape to it? Wanting perhaps in climax and denouement, but fetching its principals withal at least to this present gravely tranquil plateau.<sup>83</sup>

Because, internally, the letters are incapable of projecting to an end they assume at this point, within the text as a whole, the position of a 'tranquil plateau'. Barth's image of the book as a series of waves surging forward, receding, repeating this process, makes sense of this. Here, one is at a still point; not knowing whether the tide is still rising or has already turned to fall away.

But, of course, the several narratives are moving at different paces and even as Germaine's story is suspended, others are hurrying towards their climax and denouement. Todd's decision to commit suicide follows from his second Dark Night of the Soul and must obviously, given the nature of the whole book, be a re-enactment of his previous decision.

But I do not conceive 13R to be necessarily either a detailed rerun of 13L or a tidy wrap-up of my life. If differences remain unreconciled, distances unbridged, mysteries unresolved, businesses unfinished by (say) 9/21 or 22, so be it, Dad: I'll keep our appointment.<sup>34</sup>

The difficulties for us, as readers, arise because of the way in which these two letters from Todd rehearse a series of events which will shape the final pages of his story. First, the ringing 'phone at the end of the 8/8 letter is the first version of the end of his final contribution to the novel. It is also the first call of that evening - the second is from Polly and, being answered by Jeannine, precipitates Polly's marriage and the 'noiseless, flashless, unshrapneled blast' of the letter announcing her wedding: and, being a bomb, it is the first version of the end of the novel for Todd.

Secondly, the log entries on his letter of 29/8 are the first, pithy version of his later letter in which he describes the last voyage of the *Osborn Jones*. Finally, the letter is a re-enactment of his change of mind 32 years earlier. This time, by changing his mind, he has chosen to become a character in the present novel.

Jacob's account of his rescuing of Marsha from Comalot [come a lot?, coma a lot?, a distorted version of Camelot?] is a distorted re-enactment of his affair with Peggy Rankin and of the days after which led up to his adultery with Rennie Morgan. Aside from the fact that these letters give us our first actual view of LILYVAC and of the drugged and littered world of Jerome Bray - and as such shows him as the antipathy of those around him - the major import of these two letters is their double approach to a dramatic climax

the pistol, aimed at a point just above a point equidistant between your Eyes, is in Joe Morgan's hand<sup>es</sup>

Look here, Joe, you Expostulated.  
You Bring A Friend too, Joe said, not exactly an invitation. My wife. Alive and unfucked by you.  
Joe.  
Maybe I'll tell you then what my real grievance against you is,  
Horner.<sup>es</sup>

This is a point towards which we now read in Jacob's letters; the discovery of Joe's motivation, because it may go some way towards explaining the events of *Der Wiedertraum*, and thus of the rest of the novel.

The Andrew Burlingame Cooke IV posthumous letters become, this time, firmly embedded in Andrew Burlingame Cooke VI's editorial remarks, appropriately enough as

these remarks begin with the latter's indication of his triple identity as Andrew Burlingame Cooke VI, Monsieur Casteene, and Baron André Castine. The letter closes with the thorough confusion of Andrew Burlingame Cooke IV's identity as the "long chronicle of Andrew Cook IV trails off into the same marshy equivocation that engendered it"<sup>37</sup>.

Two things need to be written about this. First, that the Game of governments is, at the last, shown to be a failure in that it has not had an impact on the *shape*, as opposed to the *processes*, of history. Secondly, that the heavy plotting of the eighteenth century and Napoleonic worlds breaks up against the nineteenth century. This is in accord with Barth's diagnosis that the realism of that era is an aberration; something which can be surpassed in the twentieth century. Hence Andrew Burlingame Cooke VI's compulsion, despite the apparent failures which these letters have led to, to put into motion the Second Revolution.

Jerome Bray's letters are an indication of the breakdown of language within his discourse, as the substitution of numbers and words and phrases from French, German and Spanish demonstrates. But, more importantly, the deciphering process which it is necessary to go through when reading his letters reveals some of the ways in which the plot-structures of the novel will be drawn together and focusses our attention on the coming events at Fort McHenry. The genealogical table included in his second letter can, if we make additions from our reading elsewhere in this text, be developed into a description of



the whole novel. The import of this for a reading of Letters is an insistence on the need to develop a series of interpretive strategies in order to make sense of a sort from this novel. Just as the novel is a synthesis of forms of inscription, so our reading must be a synthesis of forms of explication.

To explain the purpose of Ambrose's first letter, it is necessary to go on to the Author's first letter where, in the most detailed account yet of the design and purposes of Letters, he gives the following formal or procedural consideration

At a point 6/7ths of the way through the book - that is, in the neighbourhood of its climaxes - I want there dutifully to be echoed the venerable convention of the text-within-the-text: something classical-mythological, I think, to link this project with its predecessor and to evoke the origins of fiction in the oral narrative tradition. I have in mind to draft this little off-centre text first and let the novel accrete around it like a snail shell.<sup>22</sup>

Ambrose's letter, then, is an account of the formulation not only of Perseid and Bellerophoniad and the collection of now-familiar materials on the nature of heroism, but also of another thesis. Namely, the relativisation of that account of heroism in such a way as to make possible the development of a series of models into which all stories and all people can fit -

4. Such a pattern might even be discovered in one's own, unheroical life. In the stages of one's professional career, for example, or the succession of one's love affairs.<sup>23</sup>

The endlessly relative model of recapitulation goes a long way to explaining the structure of the whole as it plots the progress of its characters. Each one of them has evolved a model whereby they can approach heroism. But, if

one might choose to object to this as an overly formal means of working to a climax, then Ambrose is ready to reply:

5. If one imagines an artist less enamoured of the world than of the language we signify with, yet less enamoured of the language than the signifying narrative, and yet less enamoured of the narration than of its formal arrangement, one need not necessarily imagine that artist therefore forsaking the world for language, language for the processes of narration, and those processes for the abstract possibilities of form.<sup>30</sup>

Quite clearly, Barth is giving us a more sophisticated and extensive version of the debate from "Dunyazadiad" about the mutual but difficult relationship between containers and contents. This has been extrapolated to a demonstration of the postmodernist aesthetic. A text which has a self-awareness of form must show that self-awareness within itself; it must reveal to the reader the conditions of its own production. In this sense postmodernism is at one with several other strands of twentieth-century aesthetic and linguistic thought; Brecht's theory of alienation, the formalists' idea of *ostranenie*, the structuralists' conception of language and discourse as material practices. For the practising postmodernist this means

All that remains is for you to work out a metaphorical physics to turn stones into stars, as heat + pressure + time turn dead leaves into diamonds. I have in mind Medusa's petrifying gaze, reflected and re-reflected at the climax, not from Athena's mirror-shield, but from her lover Perseus's eyes: the transcension of paralysing self-consciousness to productive self-awareness.<sup>31</sup>

That is, the turning of formal awareness into material in the text's production. So, at the same time as the novel is engaged in this self-explication it is also pointing us towards still more dramatic climaxes as we search for that

"skeleton key that will unlock at once the seven several plot-doors"\*\*\*. It is significant of the advance that Barth has made in his conception of postmodernism that this climax is contained within the text - as integrated into the content of the text - rather than being an extraneous part of the form (as in "Menelaiad"), and that it is a multiple climax which occurs for different characters in different places and for the reader over and over again. The pleasure of the text!

It is appropriate that the final section of Letters should be, in terms of the disjuncture between the chronological order of events and the order of the letters as they appear in the novel, the most complex of the seven sections. As Germaine writes, "In as jigsaw fashion as a Modernist novel, the story emerges". It is a story of denouements and endings in which, to a very large extent, the sense of making a conclusion is more foregrounded than the sense of reading to an end.

Germaine's letters are "a vision of 7s, the denouements that follow climaxes"<sup>23</sup> - albeit that they are provisional denouements in that they do not give conclusive answers. Marriage is performed and consummated, but the question of Germaine's pregnancy is left open for she is not to visit the doctor to discover if she is 'not menopausal but pregnant' until after her (and Ambrose's) final letter. And even if her pregnancy is confirmed the status of her issue and even its paternity (as Marsha's letter alerts us) is open to doubt. Is the child hers and Ambrose's, or hers and André/Bray's? Still other questions are left unanswered at this stage. Who stole the letter from Ambrose's jacket? Who stole the Tower of Truth plans from the Menschaus, and why? But if these letters are left open, to be answered in one way or another by those letters we still have to read, there is still an overwhelming sense of conclusion here. Jacob Horner and Marsha Blank marry and thus release Ambrose from certain obligations.. Ambrose's proposal is accepted. And Joe Morgan's death and funeral give the events of the book, for Germaine at least, a sense of symmetry.

It was a fairly nauseating ceremonial, not however without its comic touches. I should like to pass over it except that so many of 'your' characters were there, and that gives to this narrative of my affair with Ambrose Mensch an almost novelistic symmetry.<sup>24</sup>

This sense of serene conclusion is made possible by the procession of successful re-enactments between her and Ambrose. From the monthly re-enactment of past affairs, we move to the re-run of their affair by the week, by the day, by the hour, by the sexual act, up to the marriage.

But this serenity is followed, in the sequence of letters, and enclosed, in chronological terms, by Todd's letters. The first, the tale of his disastrous last voyage and destructive final sexual relationship with Jeannine. The second, chronologically the final letter of the whole novel, is his final will and testament which concludes one way or another with the big bang.

Todd's penultimate letter, although circulating around a re-enactment of the Mack v. Mack court case of 1938, is a masterpiece of relativism. Its major import is the events with Jeannine which

begin to send her down whatever path she's gone. On the other hand (I must tell myself) she might have taken that path sooner, or some worse one later, but for her pleasure in my company.<sup>25</sup>

The events of the filming, so important to Germaine's letters, become peripheral; a surface across which Todd passes on his way to suicide. And, in contrast to Germaine, he concludes this letter inconclusively

I hope to press all relevant mourners for more information about What in the World is Going On. Did you expect a climax, Dad? A surprise ending, a revelation? Sorry. I here close my Inquiry for good, first opened 49 years ago this month. As you did not deign to let me know why you turned yourself off, I shall not tell you this time (as I did in 1937) how, when, and where I

mean to do likewise. Commence your own Inquiry! Begin, what in your life you never once began, a Letter to  
Your Son<sup>96</sup>

In Todd's last letter two questions are answered. Drew stole the Tower of Truth plans and the Mack v. Mack legal case is resolved. But other questions are still left unresolved: the congruence of identity between Andrew Burlingame Cook VI and Baron André Castine is still open to question, as is his/their whereabouts. Who is knocking on the door? And, of course, what happens at 7:00am? Because of the novel's design we do not, at this point, know even if any of these questions are to be answered.

Jacob's letter, written before any of the four we have already discussed, brings his (written) story to a close. It recounts the conclusion of Der Wiedertraum and finally explains its purpose. Joe's revenge was motivated not by Jacob's acts but by his writing down an account of them. This is followed by Joe's death/suicide, the funerary consequences of which we have already been acquainted, and by Jacob's entry into literary silence and his return to the teaching of prescriptive grammar: the point at which we first made his acquaintance 16 years before. The import of this is two-fold. First, to point to the possibility of silence always lurking at the edge of the story, towards an aesthetic which operates as the antithesis of the voluminous version of postmodernism with which Barth is associated. Secondly, to demonstrate within the text the very real and material consequences of taking the impact of the written word as seriously as the actions of the outside world. This is a logical consequence of the aesthetic of postmodernism at work in this text, because

its ontological confusions blur the hierachy of reality with which we operate on a daily basis.

Andrew Burlingame Cook VI's letters stand at the figurative heart of this final section and act as the solution to many of the the questions raised so far. Jeannine/Bea is in Jerome Bray's grasp: he is both Andrew Burlingame Cook VI and Baron André Castine. And they extent still further his conception of the Second Revolution, such that

blending less obtrusively with our surroundings, we will ring down the curtain on Act One (the 1960's, the first 7-year plan) and raise it on Act Two.<sup>97</sup>

All of which is acceptable: the Burlingame Cookes, after all, have an astounding record of perseverance, disappearance and re-appearance. But concealed within the plan is Henry Burlingame VII's postscript to the latter of the letters, denouncing it as a forgery. It also explains the theft from Ambrose's jacket at the wedding and outlines the vertiginous possibilities for the continuation of the Second Revolution. Then, just as Henry Burlingame faded away at the end of The Sot-Weed Factor to continue his work unobserved, he vanishes to continue his work - whatever that may be. At the heart of this section of denouements is a note of ominous continuation. Ominous, because it has no discernible single purpose and thus it pulls away from the drift of the rest of this section towards conclusion.

Just as Todd, Jacob, and Henry have re-enacted the ends of the original works in which they (or their predecessors) were included, so Jerome Bray re-enacts the

ambiguous conclusion of the Revised New Syllabus from Giles Goat-Boy. His list of sevens, divided into seven groups, is the basis for the re-programming of LILYVAC II - which will, in the seventh year of the seventh decade produce the 'final print-out of the complete, perfect, and final opus NUMBERS'. Thus beginning, at the Bicentennial, the Second American Revolution.

Ambrose's final pair of letters act, respectively, as an explanation of the progress of his affair with Germaine and as an explanation, fragmented into alphabetical lists, of the design and motivation for this novel. The latter, coming after 'the end' of the novel, acts as a postscript in explanation just as its own postscript explains the design of the novel in which it is included. Much of this list can be seen as final revelations about the plot: Ambrose is revealed as the person pounding on the belfry door. But the rest acts as account, explanation and evaluation of the text as a whole. This list is the novel in microcosm in that it identifies the story of Ambrose and Germaine as central to the novel's forward motion - after all, Germaine is the one new correspondent and as such is not mere re-capitulation of earlier writing. But it also goes beyond that to spell out the overall mechanisms of the book, thus emphasising the postmodernist project of productive self-awareness. despite the design, much of the text is devoted to narrative, to story-telling, to plot.

The 'final' two letters are written before the marriage of Germaine and Ambrose (and, therefore, the whole novel exists in the space before the possibility of



the marriage of the modes of writing the two represent has been shown to be either successful or a failure) and they stand at opposite ends of the scale of tones across which the book as a whole runs. From the unabashed sentiment of 'an alphabetical wedding toast' to the confusion that exists between 'now' and 'the end'. Contained in the latter are the seeds of Sabbatical and an extended trope which directly connects the writing of the novel to the building of the Tower of Truth. Whilst the metaphor's construction is clear, its purpose is not. Two readings at least are possible: a direct comparison between the Tower of Truth and Letters, or an indirect one. That the novel will follow the same fate as the tower, cracking as soon as it is finished as its weight bears down on the insufficient foundations. Or, that the two, both mighty edifices, stand at opposite ends of the fate and purpose of culture in contemporary American society: as a grotesque mockery and as a major contribution. What is clear is that the uncertain fate of the Tower presages the uncertain fate of the book at the hands of the reviewers and its readers in the years following its publication.

Having completed this long march through the text it is now time to take stock of its achievement. Its clearest contribution is the establishment of the possibility of narratologies (the plural is crucial) by tearing open the conception that narrative must have a beginning, a middle and an end (in that order) without collapsing into a confusion so great as to make the text unreadable.

This becomes especially clear if we take on board Todorov's idea that

To study the structure of a narrative's plot, we must first present this plot in the form of a summary, in which each distinct action of the story has a corresponding proposition.<sup>23</sup>

For, if we present a more or less complete summary of the events of the novel and then interpret the corresponding proposition, we would still have to face the undeniable fact that this is vastly reductive of the novel (and, indeed, of any novel which assumes a multiple perspective).

A great deal of the 'meanings' of Letters reside within its structure and within the possibilities of multiple reading strategies that this pattern makes possible. Not simply whose account we choose to accept as more accurate, but also the crucial question of the order in which we choose to turn the pages of the text. The provisionality, the openness, of this novel lies to a great extent in our awareness that we cannot read simultaneously along a number of different paths. Any reading of the novel must be self-aware that it is creating a reading of the text. In that way, if in no

other, the subject reader is in a creative relationship with the pre-established structures of the text.

It is, therefore, more appropriate to read Letters with a different idea from Todorov in mind;

the organisation of the narrative is therefore produced on the level of interpretation and not on that of the events-to-be-interpreted. The combinations of these events are sometimes singular, incoherent, but this does not mean that narrative lacks organisation; simply that this organisation is situated on the level of ideas, not on that of events.<sup>23</sup>

The crucial idea here is the dual notion of multiplicity and partiality working in tandem. We are reading multiple accounts and interpretations of events which seem to lead towards inclusiveness, but at the same time we are aware that this is only a partial account - letters are missing because the pattern of the novel requires their absence. This would seem to be a re-introduction of Richardson's back-door assertion of the metalinguist until we remember that one of the characters is the author of the pattern by which the novel is controlled. A single discourse cannot reproduce events, but neither can a series of discourses.

Barth's emphasis, as shown by the disruption of chronology, is on the linguistic recreations of events, and the way in which different discourses organise those perceptions in different ways. A large part of the text's import resides in its ability to reproduce versions of events through the establishment of different discourses: language is always also but never simply about itself. That is why the novel crosses and re-crosses the same events from different perspectives; to argue that our notion of reality is linguistically generated and that the same event occupies a variety of positions in the

understanding of different people, has different meaning. And this is a meaning generated by the correspondents entering into a productive relationship with the pre-established structures of the world around them; again, the dialectical interaction of subject and object can be seen as crucial to the generation of meanings.

The crucial change that has taken place here is the move away from a discourse which attempts to be solely about itself, away from the road into silence that Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera led towards.

As Patricia Waugh writes, Letters is presented as a fiction which

in rejecting realism more thoroughly, posit(s) the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions.<sup>100</sup>

Barth's argument is not that material conditions do not exist before language. It is that they are not intelligible before language has acted upon them. The events of the novel have happened, but they only acquire intelligibility as they are recounted. In their repetition, the events are differentiated from the language which describes and analyses them. Equally well, this repetition reminds the reader that there is no easy relationship between language and the events they describe. There is no metalinguist lurking in the background, to present the reader with the 'true' account of events after they have progressed through various versions of falsehood.

In this sense Barth follows Waugh's identification of a continuity between modernism and postmodernism.

Postmodernism can be seen to exhibit the same sense of crisis and loss of belief in an external authoritative system of order as that which prompted modernism. Both affirm the constructive powers of the mind in the face of apparent phenomenal chaos.

The subject of the Great American Novel becomes then, in part, a regeneration of historical and literary pasts and, in part, a self-conscious witness to this regeneration. It is a story about the writing of the story of the American past, present, and future.<sup>101</sup>

The subject of Letters is both the building of the Tower of Truth and of Letters. The purposes, reception and fate of the former are intimately linked to the purpose, reception and fate of the latter. And with Barth's Letters, the whole of 'letters' in the contemporary world.

In the end, the relativism and eclecticism revealed by the openness of the text is characteristic both of a liberal world view and, in particular, of a synthesising impulse characteristic of that world view. The former wishes to overcome those unitary discourses which threaten to disrupt the tendency towards synthesis whilst the latter represents, in turn, the transcension of the old literary categories and of the ideas of The Literature of Exhaustion. The synthesis of modes: modernist design, realist plotting, and proto-realist form: is the ideas of The Literature of Replenishment in action and, as such, represents a significant advance in literature.

But it is not a simple advance for it works as both a demonstration of a new possibility in writing and, simultaneously, the closing-off of that particular possibility. It is a tradition of single and separate texts and is therefore exemplary not only of Barth's work but of the 'traditions of postmodernism'.

**Conclusion:**

**Post-modernism and postmodernism**

The statement with which the previous chapter ended asks as many questions as it answers. Most obviously, what do we mean when we speak or write of postmodernism? The plethora of terms which other writers have used in their attempts to define this phenomenon - the introverted novel, the anti-novel, irrealism, surfiction, the self-begetting novel, fabulation, metafiction, narcissistic narrative, new mutants, new sensibility, post-modernism, postmodernism, POSTmodernISM' - and the insistence of many of the practitioners of fiction to whom the term 'postmodernist' has been assigned by the critical machine that they do not understand what is meant by it, indicates that to attempt more than the most provisional definition of postmodernism is to court a critical disaster.

The spread of the term (and, therefore, of its definitions) into a variety of fields of inquiry far beyond the boundaries of literature, or even of the humanities, adds still further to the difficulty and confusion involved in arriving at a precise definition of that which I have chosen to call first post-modernism (at one point in Barth's development) and now postmodernism.

But of one thing we can be sure at this early (or late) stage: that the disappearance of the hyphen from postmodernism is important in that it marks a shift in postmodernist thinking from seeing itself as the historical heir to modernism, and towards seeing itself as in possession of a different and separate set of sensibilities to modernism. Indeed, one could say that in this heterogenous collection of writers and thinkers who make up the assessors of postmodernism are divided by the

presence (or absence) of the hyphen. To me, the loss of the hyphen marks the simultaneous loss and recovery of history in postmodernist thought. It is lost as postmodernism ceases to see itself as the heir to its artistic predecessors and begins to make claims for its aesthetic and philosophical capacity which have been characterised as the 'postmodernist breakthrough' into a 'new sensibility'. History is recovered as postmodernism begins to construct itself as an alternative chronology of artistic achievement which can be seen as the ever-present shadow of the 'traditional' lines of literature, always there at the edges and stalking the themes and techniques of realism, naturalism and modernism with their refutation.

One thing is clear. Namely, that the sheer proliferation of postmodernisms means that they are a collection of phenomena with which the contemporary must engage. This is a task fraught with difficulties, as Ihab Hassan recognises when he writes that;

The irritation with the term postmodernism cannot be soothed with bibliographies. Some will cry, here is another fad or fashion, another instance of the enforced obsolescence in our cultural life. Others will whisper to themselves, we have barely understood modernism; must we now start to learn about postmodernism? Others still, taking a more reasonable and patient stance, will simply ask, is this distinction really necessary?<sup>2</sup>

Barth begins his own discussion of postmodernism by suggesting that Gerald Graff and Ihab Hassan

both rightly proceed from the premise that that program (of postmodernism) is in some respects an extension of the program of modernism, in other respects a reaction against it.<sup>3</sup>



This at least provides us with a starting point: "the program of modernism". From Virginia Woolf we learn that there was a decisive change in the nature of human consciousness in December 1910 and if it is hard to accept the abruptness of Woolf's statement, it is equally difficult to disagree with the definitive nature of the change for which she argues. It was a shift from the sensibilities of the nineteenth century to the consciousness of the twentieth. Versions of the nature and origins of this shift have been presented in an earlier chapter, but what they all have in common is the loss of belief in a rational external authority structuring the universe. For fiction this meant that

novelists seriously interested in coming to terms with the modern world would have to abandon realism and take up the mythical method. This view has not lost its hold on us. The classics of modern fiction self-consciously overturned the conventions of bourgeois realism, registering in their form as well as their content a comment on the bankruptcy of the bourgeois social order and its world view. Modern fiction radically disrupted the linear flow of narrative, frustrated expectations about the unity and coherence of human character and the cause-and-effect continuity of its development, and called into question, by means of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions, the universalisable moral and philosophical 'meaning' of literary action. It shifted the focus of attention from the objective unfolding of events to the subjective experiencing of events, sometimes to the point of enveloping the reader in a solipsistic universe.<sup>4</sup>

To this list Barth adds two things

the modernists' insistence, borrowed from their romantic forebears, on the special, usually alienated role of the artist in his society, or outside it: James Joyce's priestly, self-exiled artist-hero; Thomas Mann's artist as charlatan, or mountebank; Franz Kafka's artist as anorexic, or bug. I would add, too, what is no doubt implicit in Graff's catalogue, the modernist foregrounding of language and technique as opposed to straightforward traditional 'content'.<sup>5</sup>

Thus far, this is an orthodox literary critical historical account. But, like so many systems of thought,

modernism assumes itself to be the point to which all human history has worked. It is, it seems to assume, a high point towards which all previous forms and contents lead and away from which all after it decline. The area of controversy opens anew when we ask, what happens next? This question, and possible answers thereto, can be couched in a variety of sets of terms. Steiner's argument is that the modernist substitution of art for religion must fall silent in the face of the ultimate obscenity of the holocaust. We can follow Charles Newman's example when he writes

With the insouciance of a Virginia Woolf, let us periodise Post-Modernism with the velocity of the money supply, which began rising in the spring of 1946, accelerated in the late fifties, peaked in 1969 as the great Society demanded both a foreign war and a domestic slumber party, continued out of control throughout the seventies, and began to subside until the summer of 1981, as, one by one, the myths of inflation began to be brutally dismantled. It is no accident that the outcry of the intellectuals traces this trajectory perfectly - from whine to scream to wheeze.<sup>6</sup>

My own position would be that postmodernism is in some sense a response to the post-war development of state capitalism as an international phenomena which first prolonged the post-war boom and then generated the most extended crisis this century by its movement of the manufacture of conventional and nuclear weapons ever closer to the core of production. Whichever versions we choose to employ, it is clear that they all recognise postmodernism as a response to the changed conditions of the world after World War 2 and that, beyond this obvious position, it is insufficient for artists to continue to employ old forms for the expression of new contents.

Because of the legacy of the modernists, and of the particular position of the artist within modern production, the solution to this problem is always couched in terms of building a new avant garde. Barth argued in 1967 that the avant garde of Joyce's generation have become the establishment, a point re-iterated by Sukenick when he wrote that

The avant-garde is a convenient propaganda device but when it wins the war everything is avant-garde which leaves us just about where we were before. the only thing that's sure is that we move, and as we move we leave things behind - the way we felt, the way we talked about it. Form is your footprints in the sand when you look back. Art consists of the forms we leave behind in our effort to keep up with ourselves, define ourselves, create ourselves as we move along;<sup>7</sup>

This point is made again and anew by Jerome Klinkowitz in his identifications of Barth as part of the old, tired and deeply conservative establishment of contemporary American literary production<sup>8</sup>.

A more general variant of this question exercises the contemporary generation: namely, what constitutes the avant garde when the avant garde of modernism has become the orthodoxy, or been surpassed by other developments? What was the avant garde of yesterday is the exhausted form of today. The experimental text of one moment has ossified into a museum piece the next. This is, of course, a process which is deeply affected by the operation of criticism as it selects and re-selects the 'important' texts of the past from a variety of perspectives. the pressures shaping our perceptions of what is the avant garde are, in many ways, similar to those which shape the production of the text itself.

Barth's recognition of this is demonstrated by his development of the 'single volume tradition' but even so, this present work is an indication of Barth's absorption into the academy and thus, to some extent, into the orthodoxy.

From this perspective at least four channels of possibility open up for both writers and critics. First, to carry on as if nothing had happened in the same 'old modernist' way. Secondly, to repudiate the whole project of modernism and argue for a return to 'the good old days' of realism. Thirdly, to establish a new advance camp in the lands of experimentation. Fourthly, to attempt the synthesis of modernism and premodernism into a position which acts as a transcension of both.

If the case were really this simple, though, we could construct an argument that three of these positions are 'post-modernist' in the simple that they are preceded by modernism. It is incumbent, then, to examine the ways in which postmodernism is a distinct style of thought and writing. It exists, then, not only as a move beyond the diversity of modernism(s) but also as a manner of thought which attempts in one way or another to take account of the acceleration of cultural production.

Marshall Berman has summarised the consequences of this accurately;

Many artistic and literary intellectuals have embraced a mystique of post-modernism, which strives to cultivate ignorance of modern history and culture, and speaks as if all human feeling, expressiveness, play, sexuality and community have only just been invented - by the post-modernists - and were unknown, even inconceivable, before last week.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense postmodernism is the philosophical reflection of the development of capitalism in a post-holocaust world. It reproduces the tendencies of state capitalism on a world scale in philosophical and artistic forms, tendencies which lead towards dehumanisation and organisation on such a massive scale that at the individual level it appears as a chaos. Obsolescence is built into the system and we find ourselves living in a world of instant classics. The diachronic finds itself ever more circumvented by the synchronic. Linearity falters, and is displaced by discontinuity and montage. The signifier breaks loose from the signified. A sense of history is replaced by a boredom with the 'old'. This is the universe of the post-structuralist, the post-modernist, the post-contemporary. The tower of truth collapses even as it is being built.

The software programme on which this is being typed was in the forefront of wordprocessing technology a year ago, and is about to be replaced by a new generation which will make it to all intents and purposes as avant garde as a quill pen.

This is, for the literary critic, practitioner or historian, a nightmare world in which the novel is either dead (and been usurped by its bastard the video cassette) or has become an idiot child (which has Craig Thomas, Judith Krantz, and a myriad of others as its progenitor). It is the cultural environment in which people are "really into books at the moment" and throwing them away (or burning them) the next.

But just as postmodernism is a response to the diversities of modernism, the forms that it can take are various. If the above is a sketch in fascinated repulsion from the phenomenon, it is equally well not a complete version of the effects of postmodernism. There has been an equally strong school which has committed itself to the forms of postmodernism, and has employed them as either ends in themselves or as vehicles for the expression of modernist (or even premodernist) ideas. This apparent disjunction is made possible because

for Professor Alter, Professor Hassan, and others, postmodernist fiction merely emphasises the 'performing' self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy. With varying results, they claim, postmodernist writers write a fiction that is more and more about itself and its processes and less and less about objective reality and life in the world.<sup>10</sup>

Form is foregrounded, and we read that form, that manner, rather than attending to the ostensible content - which, indeed, may read as a contradiction to the form. The most remembered moment in a Brautigan novel amongst my acquaintances and colleagues is the "Mayonnaise chapter", and remembered, I suspect, primarily for its formal inventiveness rather than the "human need" expressed in the letter to which "P.S. Sorry I forgot to give you the mayonnaise" is the conclusion. It would not be the first time in the history of literature that form has apparently outstripped content. For the postmodernists, with their acute awareness that the performance of a form may bring new meaning to a content, this is indeed a serendipity. It also goes some way to explaining their attention to, and emphasis on, the importance of style. Parody and pastiche

are crucial to their work because they permit the demonstration of an awareness of style without ever having to concede to the limitations that a particular style or register may set to content. As Linda Hutcheon writes

Parody is an exploration of difference and similarity; in metafiction it invites a more literary reading, a recognition of literary codes. but it is wrong to see the end of this process as mockery, ridicule, or mere destruction. Metafiction parodies and imitates as a way to a new form which is just as serious and valid, as a synthesis, as the form it dialectically attempts to surpass. It does not necessarily involve a movement away from *mimesis*, however, unless by that term is meant only a rigid object-imitation or behaviouristic-realistic motivation.<sup>12</sup>

It may be possible, then, to establish postmodernism as a point from which to look back on the history of literature and ideas. From that perspective modernism ceases to be the end-point and becomes a half-way house. If Hegel was the advocate of rationalism and Nietzsche the celebrant of contingency, modernism was the attempt to express Nietzsche's content in Hegel's form, or vice versa. Indeed, after the assertion of what makes postmodernism a new force in writing - the emphasis on self-reflexivity and performance - the next stage in the development of postmodernism can be seen as the establishment of its pedigree. This is a project close to much of Ihab Hassan's work, as he searches for that contemporary equivalent of the philosopher's stone; the first use of the term 'post-modern'.<sup>13</sup> This quest has led him towards producing a account of the literary past something like this:

'Literary History'

1798 Literary Ballads: Romanticism begins

1829 Les Chouans: Realism

1880 Le roman experimental: Naturalism

1910 (December): Modernism

1939 (September): Postmodernism

Except, of course that postmodernism 'began' with Sterne(1759), continued with Diderot(1796), was in abeyance for most of the nineteenth century, re-emerged with Machado de Assis(1880), and really got into its stride with Beckett in 1938. Elements of the postmodernist has been within narrative fiction since at least the beginnings of the novel.

But even this is, perhaps, not an accurate perspective since it attempts to explain postmodernism as a continuity when it may be more correct to see it as a series of discontinuous moments:

continuities maintained on a certain level of abstraction (i.e., history) are resisted in the interests of the quiddity and discretion of art, the space that each work or action creates around itself.<sup>14</sup>

Just as structuralist linguistics attempted to refute the notion that "what is not historical in linguistics is not scientific"<sup>15</sup> and replace it with the idea that the synchronic was the sphere of the scientific, so postmodernism attempts to establish an idea of literature as ever-expanding sets of disparate spheres which occasionally touch. In this sense it is also a project close to the work of some of the post-structuralists, who have toiled to demonstrate that apparent completion is incomplete, that the smooth is jagged, that the finished is only a provisional conclusion; that the continuities of history are a fiction surrounding a series of disparate, broken and grating moments.

Even so, this perspective cannot explain why postmodernism has grown to such a dominance in the



contemporary avant garde. The spectre of history, its adversary, stalks it even at its moment of apparent triumph. We can accept Saussure's attacks on the mechanical version of history which dominated social thought in the nineteenth century without having to abandon the category of history altogether. We can replace T.S. Eliot's version of the development of tradition and the movement of history as a gradual and enclosed motion with Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, in which the forward motion is not even and circumspect but rather uneven and open to both periods of stasis and sudden leaps forward, without having to abandon an idea of historical motion. What we need, perhaps, is a dialectical view which combines the synchronic with the diachronic notion of literary histories which interlock with one another. The appropriate metaphor here is Borges's The Garden of Forking Paths, which progresses without any sense of unilinear development (which is not to say that it does not progress!). It is an idea of literary history in which "new lines emerge from the past because our eyes every morning open anew"<sup>16</sup>, in which each text is the inscription of a parole based on the langue of available texts. Tristram Shandy is a case in point here: from the perspective of the history of the novel as the triumph of representation over fabulation, it appears as a 'sport': from Barth's position it is part of a tradition of works scattered across history and geography upon which he draws.

We know there's no such thing as progress, that a new age might be a worse one, and that since the future brings no redemption we better look to the present. In consequence the new tradition

makes itself felt as a presence rather than a development. Instead of a linear sequence of historical influences it seems a network of interconnections revealed to our particular point of view.<sup>17</sup>

Our point of view, though, is unavoidably that of perceiving the differences between postmodernism and its predecessors. The child's obsession is to step out from the shadow cast by its parents. In this sense, if no other, postmodernism feels itself as an historical phenomenon. If modernism insisted on the opacity, the conventionality of language as its first step to breaking free of realism, postmodernism insists on the conventionality of modes of discourse as a way of defining its difference from modernism and realism. It is an emphasis on the difference between epistemology and ontology which has accepted the difference in the epistemologies of realism and modernism and come down in favour of the latter. Hence, The death of the novel and other stories and the conception of a literature of exhaustion. It is both a continuation of, and a separation from, the project of modernism. Indeed, we could argue that the emphasis upon, and foregrounding of, questions of ontology is postmodernism's addition to the equation of modernism. It accepts and recognises, albeit implicitly, modernism's epistemology and then translates those difficulties into ontological terms.

At this point, simplistic versions of representation are among the first casualties. The act of writing has always been framed by an awareness of itself as an activity. The 'closed' tendency in postmodernism has only this awareness; the 'open' tendency has this self-

awareness as one among many. And whilst the former often falters into an acute self-reflexivity in which its own difficulties become so foregrounded that the actual activity ceases, in the latter modes of representation are retrieved and put back into activity . A variation of this basic position would be that in the 'closed' tendency only the performing self exists, whilst in the 'open' tendency the performing self is an integral part of the performance. In both cases, understanding the difference between an imitation and a copy is the crucial move. We imitate with the lenses of discourse, form and history clearly visible. We copy in blindness, innocence, ignorance.

This is the twist of the dialectical knife. This apparently most unhistorical manner is predicated by a clear sense of history; of where narrative and the novel came from and where they have been before. That literary sense of history is the external half of a sensibility, the other (internal) half of which is a literary sense of literature. And if this is a reality composed of books, so be it says and writes the postmodernist. For a fiction freed from representation and from a belief in external order can create its own, fictive, world (which may, by accident, resemble the world the reader inhabits). Besides which, books are part of the mechanism by which we produce our realities.

Perhaps the fundamental assumption behind this line of fiction is that the act of composing a novel is basically not different from that of composing one's reality, which brings me back to a slogan I have drawn from Robbe-Grillet's criticism that the main didactic job of the contemporary novelist is to teach the reader how to invent his world.<sup>13</sup>

John Barth's relation to this field of ideas is complex and contradictory, not least because his writing career can be divided into five pairs of texts. And if it is tempting to see the move from The Floating Opera to Sabbatical as a steady development, it is also a wrong perception. It is more useful to see his work as five paired responses to different aspects of the field.

The Floating Opera and The End of the Road share a distrust of the conventions of realism. In the former we are treated to a gentle mockery of the convention of the dramatic climax - Todd cannot remember the date of the day on which he changed his mind - and that of symbolic parallels between art and reality. At the same time, the workings of the book's narrative voices are revealed to us through that voice. All of this is conducted in a comic tone, and Barth's description of it as comedy is appropriate not only to the argument of the book but to its construction as well. This is because it is not until the undeniably darker story of Jacob Horner that we arrive at the notion that language is an insufficient medium for communication. Whilst this is a logical continuation of the argument of The Floating Opera - language being no more than another convention - it also strikes at the heart of the novelist's profession by declaring one of his precision tools to be useless. This discussion, based as it is on a version of Saussurean linguistics, is in the arena of epistemology. In both novels we are invited to accept the novel's status as fiction sealed off from reality by language's inability to communicate experience directly. We are invited to see the metaphor of dogs

copulating in front of a funeral from a position within the text. Our attention is pointed to it, but it is contained within a (critical) realist framework.

Whereas, in The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy, the metaphor of heroism shapes the texts because it has been absorbed into the texture of the fiction. Language has become a metaphor for the novel's desire to shape experience through various strategies (one of them language itself). Both these works are produced in a language from which we are distanced, which we have to learn to read just as the characters have to learn to 'read' the reality in which they exist. And, just as both texts hover between order and chaos in their content, so too does their form. This is true not only of the language they employ - "'Forget the word sky", Burlingame said off-handedly, swinging up on his gelding, "'tis a blinder to your eyes. There is no dome of heaven yonder"'<sup>13</sup> - but also of the forms - forget what you thought the novel should be, 'tis a blinder to the possibilities of fiction. There is no such thing as a fixed *ontological* order for writing. Whilst the content of Giles Goat-Boy revolves around the correct understanding of a written message, an epistemology, the book's form challenges ontological assumptions about the nature of fiction. The frames which enclose the *Revised New Syllabus* qualify and re-qualify the content of the text. To ignore the frames and read only the 'core' text is to miss this crucial advance in Barth's writing and thinking. Even within the *Revised New Syllabus*, though, Barth includes a reminder to his readers that this is the process at work.

All the while she marked with her finger her place in the book, to which she returned at once upon delivering her line. Mild, undistinguished creature, . . . , - Passage be yours, for what in your moment of time you did enounce, clearly as from a written text, your modest information! Simple answer to a simple question, but lacking which this tale were truncate as the Scroll, and endless fragment!

'-less fragment', I thought I heard her murmur as I stooped through the little door she'd pointed out. I paused and frowned; but though her lips moved on as did her finger across the page, her words were drowned now by the bellow of Tower Clock.<sup>20</sup>

This concern with ontology, with the frames within fiction has been situated, remains with Barth through the rest of his career up to the present day. It could, indeed be seen as his major contribution to the theory and practice of postmodernism; the move from epistemological concerns to ontological concerns. Away from the perceived 'difficulties' of modernist writing, which come through the structure of the language employed, and towards a more accessible challenge to our ideas about writing. Away from a challenge to realist writing which focuses on the sentence as the bearer of meaning, and onto the genre as the unit of structure. This allows Barth to escape the charge which he himself levels at the modernists, that of elitism, whilst not lessening the radical nature of his questioning.

This concern with the forms within which writing takes place is paramount in Lost in the Funhouse and, to a lesser extent, in Chimera. The corollary of this is that, much of the time, the major thrust of these texts is towards an interrogation of the act of writing. That this takes place metaphorically, symbolically and directly should not turn us aside from the fact that this is the process taking place, although it does undermine John

Gardner's assertion that there is a yawning gulf between 'primary literature' (about the real world) and 'secondary literature' (about literature)<sup>21</sup>. They become texts about texts. What remains with us, I suspect, is a sense of the audacity of the narratological experiments with which he is engaged rather than a memory of the ostensible content. To the extent that this is true, these are 'closed' postmodernism texts. By returning to the conditions under which stories have been told, Barth examines the ways in which they can be told now and begins to abandon any hope that new stories can be told. The crucial moment for this strategy is,

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      " "" "      " "" "
      " "" "      " "" "
      " ""      WHY?      " ""
      " "      " "
      " "" "      " "" "      22
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Our attention is upon the correctness of the structuring of the frames within which this question is posed. Once the narrative strategy of realism has been abandoned, its transparency must be replaced by texts which reveal their mechanisms to the reader as the act of reading takes place. The 'problem' may be that the opacity of the mechanisms conceals everything else. In Chimera this question is taken up via the metaphor of The Writer's Block, under the pressure of which the writer can only write about his inability to write. But this, it seems to me, is a weakening of the argument because Barth has moved from an interrogation of the conditions under which writing can take place to a simple, and more or less interesting, autobiographical account. The thrust of the

argument of The Literature of Exhaustion is, after all, towards the exhaustion of forms rather than the exhaustion of the individual writer.

The major achievement of these two texts, though, is the opening-up of possibilities for narration. The charge that Barth is too concerned with the forms within which narration takes place and not sufficiently with actual narration is easily answered on two counts. First, what is the belief that a story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end (in that order)? A convention, nothing more. Its pervasiveness only means that the challenge to it must be couched in more strident terms. Secondly, even though it is not part of the book's argument Chimera does contain some perfectly respectable passages of narrative which conform, within their own very strict limits, to the Aristotelian demand.

To move from Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera to Letters and Sabbatical is to move from the literature of exhaustion to the literature of replenishment.

The simple burden of my essay was that the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness, at least in the minds of significant numbers of artist in particular times and places; in other words, that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work. I would have thought that point unexceptionable. But a great many people - among them, I fear, Senor Borges himself - mistook me to mean that literature, at least fiction, is kaput; that it has all been done already; that there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors in our exhausted medium - exactly what some critics deplore as postmodernism.<sup>23</sup>

It is easy to see how this mis-reading of The Literature of Exhaustion came about, especially in the 'death of the novel' atmosphere which was so pervasive in some circles



in the late '60s and early '70s. In a text which is so concerned to carry the argument that certain forms are exhausted it is all too easy to lose the argument that accepting the sense of exhaustion is merely the first step on the road to new, self-conscious, writing.

In The Literature of Replenishment Barth is much more concerned to carry the argument that postmodernism is a move forward because it is the transcension of old opposites:

My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century pre-modernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back ... The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism', pure and committed fiction, coterie fiction and junk fiction.<sup>24</sup>

This is an argument constructed from a position of strength, because this is precisely what Barth achieved in Letters. The mechanisms whereby the narrative had been produced were open for inspection, but they did not obscure the narrative itself. The same is true, I believe, for Sabbatical. In the latter text, the metaphor of going back in order to go forward is crucial because it is a summation of Barth's aesthetic strategy.

These two texts re-inforce a problem for the postmodernist writer which first appeared in Giles Goat-Boy. In transcending the differences between modernist and premodernist narrative strategies, they establish the possibility of a new tradition of narrative. But at the same time, they close off that particular mode of synthesis as a possibility for the future. Any work which follows in the precise footsteps will necessarily be a

copy and not an imitation. It will not have the necessary space between the originals and the imitation to allow style as parody and pastiche to operate. It is a tradition of single texts. But what was, in Giles Goat-Boy, a numbing and disabling problem, has now become a part of the overall purpose it is, in itself, a re-inforcement of the ideas of postmodernism on a wider scale: the collapsing of history into a series of discrete moments.

Barth's relationship to literary structuralism is as complex as his relationship to postmodernism, and partly for the same reasons. Just as there are almost as many versions of postmodernism as there are postmodernists, this is also true of structuralism. As well as this, at one of the points of apparent closest proximity - the attempts to establish master-theses upon which narratives are based - there is also one of the points of apparent greatest distance. Barth's re-iteration of Campbell's diagram of heroism seems to indicate that in some ways he applauds the notion that this pattern exists. But, we have to take into account a number of things. First, Barth's assertion that

no single literary text can ever be exhausted - its 'meaning' residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language.<sup>25</sup>

Presumably, then, the specific elements that go to make up the pattern also alter the pattern in some fundamental way: thus undermining the idea of the existence of the pattern. The reflection of this is Barth's refusal in his fiction to say that any plot definitely exists. This

double attitude is reproduced in his position with regard to the structuralists' theories of language.

There is, on the one hand, the acceptance of the theory that words (and by extension, forms) are, at best, inaccurate ways of reproducing the matter to which they refer - and this is, surely, a translation of the separation of signifier and signified which sets the project of structuralist linguistics in motion. But this rejection of language is always followed by the recognition that it is all we have and we might as well make the best of what is available.

To turn experience into speech - that is, to classify, to categorise, to conceptualise, to grammarise, to syntactify it - is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only is so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work.<sup>26</sup>

This is, to translate the argument for a moment into broader philosophical terms, the triumph of American pragmatism over the debilitating effects of theoretical agonising.<sup>27</sup>

The most sustained and structural reference to this is in The Sot-Weed Factor, with the continued metaphor of plots (in both sense of the word) being written on both sides of a sheet of paper. This is, surely, a reference to Saussure's image

language can also be compared to a sheet of paper: thought is the front and sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time, likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound.<sup>28</sup>

In the novel, one cannot separate the two plots because their joint, but different, developments underpin each other; nor can we separate the two manners of inscription from each other because their, historical, differences are as much part of their import as the content of the documents. This, combined with an awareness of Barth's reference to Saussure, demonstrates the way in which Barth's texts make use of the ideas and practices of structural linguistics without ever being wholly committed to the philosophical underpinning which accompanies these theories and practices. Barth employs structural linguistics in the same, pragmatic, fashion as he employs much other source material: as grist to the mill of his fiction.

The confluence of ideas, which all circulate around the notion of laying bare the device, offers a metaphor for this present project. Barth's movement from a dissatisfaction with realist notions of language to the exploration of methods of narrating, parallels the development in structuralist thinking from the exploration of the nature of language to the application of those ideas to narrative structure. Barth's recognition that this move involves a shift from epistemology to ontology is, as I have already emphasised, his major contribution to postmodernism. For it is the shift from a voice wondering what it is doing and presenting that process as a product, to a voice which produces a product whilst still continuing to demonstrate the processes which made that work possible. From paralysing self-consciousness to productive self-awareness.

This becomes more obvious when we consider that, just as structuralism can be viewed as both a method and a movement of mind - indeed, Scholes bases his Structuralism in Literature on this distinction - so too can postmodernism. From that position it is clear that Barth is, most of the time, in the former camp. Committed to the method of experimentation within narrative, but not committed to the philosophy of postmodernism as it is outlined by such writers as Ihab Hassan. He combines employment of the method of postmodernism with a philosophical commitment to an abiding liberalism.

Indeed, Hassan's primarily *philosophical* project (with its growing emphasis on discontinuity, 'jaggedness', and silence) seems to be at a great distance from Barth's continued liberalism and commitment to the qualities of love as an anchor in the contemporary world. This difference is written into their work, with Hassan's fragmentary and gnostic texts on the one hand, and Barth's voluminous attachment to narrative and plot on the other. Hassan explores the crevices in the surface of writing with his movement between critical essay, commentary on the production of the criticism, and autobiography.

We are packing. Sally asks: "How is your Prometheus?" I look up, quote Emerson whom I have been rereading: "'The Prometheus Vincit is the romance of skepticism'. So much for the gods - and our writing".

I snap a suitcase shut, ready to travel, remembering that my mother, for six months before her death, always kept a fully packed suitcase in her bedroom.<sup>29</sup>

Barth, meanwhile, has now returned to work with forms which require and demand resolution: the epistolary novel, the romance. The overwhelming drive of the latest novels

is towards closure, albeit that they contain unanswered questions which are built into the conclusions of the fictions. Harry Russecks' cry:

"No pleasure pleasures me as doth a well-spun tale, be't sad or merry, shallow or deep! If the subject's privy business, or unpleasant, who cares a fig? The road to Heaven's beset with thistles, and methinks there's many a cow-pat on't as well. And what matter if your folk are drawn from life? 'Tis not likely I'll ha' met 'em, or know'em from your telling if e'er I should! Call 'em what names ye will: in a tale they're less than themselves, and more. Besides which, if ye have the art to make 'em live - 'sheart! - thou'rt nowise liable for what the rascals do, no more than God Almighty for the lot of us. As for length, fie on't!" He raised his horny finger. "A bad tale's long though it want but a single eyeblink for the telling, and a good tale short though it takes from St. Swithin's to Michaelmas to have done with't. Ha! And the plot is tangled, d'ye say? Is't more knotful or bewildered than the skein o' life itself, that a good tale tangles the better to unsnarl? Nay, out with your story, now, and yours as well, sir, and shame on the both o' ye thou'rt not commenced already! Spin and tangle till the Dog-star sets i' the Bay - nor fear I'll count ye idle gossips: a tale well wrought is the gossip o' the gods, that see the heart and hidden point o' life on earth; the seamless web o' the world; the Warp and the Woof ... I'Christ, I do love a story, sirs! Tell away!<sup>30</sup>

acts as a coda to the whole of Barth's writing in that it is a call for the triumph of narrating, of story-telling, as a form of pleasure over the doubts and disturbances of the contemporary world even as it demonstrates the means by which that narrating is constructed. In that sense, it sets Barth at a considerable distance from Hassan and the other philosophers of postmodernism.

And yet, on two crucial points they are in agreement. First, the need for a writing which is *scriptable*, which contains within itself the traces of its own production. In this they are in a broad general agreement with the poststructuralist and deconstructionist critics as well. Consequent with this is the understanding that that trace must be marked primarily in the ontology of the text. Secondly, and this is the recent retreat by Hassan, that

the myth of the postmodernist breakthrough is precisely that; a myth.

Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future. We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern, at once.<sup>31</sup>

This mutual recognition, to be sure, has vastly different consequences. For Hassan, the committed philosopher of postmodernism, it opens the possibility of interrogating the past in search of the antecedents of postmodernism. For Barth, this permeability presents the possibility of a grand synthesis in which existing forms of writing are drawn together in a manner similar to that established by Letters.

It is towards this synthetic version of postmodernism that Barth has been working in all of his previous novels and it is not, I think, overly teleological to establish a critique of the earlier novels which sees them as necessary equipment on the way to this mountain of achievement.

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48 (April 12, 1965), p.20
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- 5 Morrell, pp.8-9
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- 7 Walter Harding, 'Needless Vulgarly in Novel', in Vine, p.8
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- 12 Thomas LeClair, 'John Barth's *The Floating Opera*: Death and the  
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- 15 Schickel, p.21
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- 20 The Floating Opera, p.10
- 21 The Floating Opera, p.10
- 22 The Floating Opera, p.12
- 23 LeClair, 'Death and the craft of fiction', p.724



- 24 The Floating Opera, p.11
- 25 The Floating Opera, p.13
- 26 The Floating Opera, p.7
- 27 Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (Harmondsworth, 1975), p.11. I will return to the place of Camus's work and of Hamlet as *textual* referents in chapter 3: for the moment I solely concerned with their status as philosophical reference points.
- 28 Evelyn Glaser-Wohrer, An Analysis of John Barth's Weltanschauung: his view of life and literature (Salzburg, 1977), p.18
- 29 Glaser-Wohrer, p.15
- 30 Glaser-Wohrer, p.32
- 31 Stephen Tanner, p.350
- 32 Glaser-Wohrer, p.32
- 33 Glaser-Wohrer, p.18
- 34 I use this term in a fashion derived from the writings of Roland Barthes, as a way of expressing these qualities and limitations that shape the text; that 'allow' it to be read. Barthes's discussion of this point occurs in the opening section of S/Z.
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- 10 The End of the Road, p.70
- 11 The End of the Road, p.98
- 12 The End of the Road, p.184
- 13 'The End of the Road', in Vine, p.11
- 14 David Kerner, 'Psychodrama in Eden', Chicago Review, 13 (1959), p.62
- 15 'A Study in Nihilism', in Vine, p.13
- 16 Paul C. Wermuth, 'Barth, John. *The End of the Road*', in Vine, p.13
- 17 The End of the Road, pp.46-47
- 18 The End of the Road, p.51
- 19 The End of the Road, p.52
- 20 The End of the Road, p.125
- 21 The End of the Road, p.75
- 22 The End of the Road, p.72
- 23 The End of the Road, p.6

- 24 John Barth, Letters (London, 1980), p.19
- 25 The End of the Road, p.17
- 26 The End of the Road, pp.86-87
- 27 Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961)
- 28 The End of the Road, p.48
- 29 The End of the Road, p.64
- 30 The End of the Road, pp.108-109
- 31 The End of the Road, pp110-111
- 32 The End of the Road, p.115
- 33 The End of the Road, p.86
- 34 The End of the Road, p.132
- 35 The End of the Road, p.117
- 36 The End of the Road, p.29
- 37 The End of the Road, p.138
- 38 Morrell, p.26
- 39 The End of the Road, pp.29-30
- 40 The End of the Road, p. 116
- 41 The End of the Road, p.132
- 42 Morrell, p.26

- 1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology (London, 1968)  
Volume Two, p.131
- 2 Tony Tanner makes this into a more general judgement of novels of adultery in the first part of Adultery and the novel, (London, 1979)
- 3 Within the framework of Barth's early realism, the author needs to create coherent characters. The Todd-figure is exploded because, within this framework, Barth cannot explore further contradictions without separating the antinomic impulses into two separate characters.
- 4 The Floating Opera, p.254
- 5 The End of the Road, p.129
- 6 This is, of course, a somewhat polemical position as all readers bring a framework of ethical and aesthetic conceptions to their reading which to some extent shapes their response to the text. It is a question of degree - The Floating Opera is complicit in this process, while The End of the Road attempts to subvert it.
- 7 The End of the Road, p.116
- 8 Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in general linguistics, (Glasgow,1974), pp.65-70
- 9 The End of the Road, p.116
- 10 Simon Clarke, The Foundations of Structuralism (Brighton, 1981)  
pp.8-9
- 11 Clarke, p.9
- 12 Clarke, p.15
- 13 Clarke, p.20
- 14 Mark Poster, Existential Marxism in Post-War France, (Princeton NJ, 1975), pp.8-9

- 15 Poster, p.5
- 16 John Sturrock, Structuralism and Since, (Oxford, 1979), p.6
- 17 Clarke, p.7
- 18 Clarke, p.26
- 19 Clarke, p.27
- 20 Poster, p.317
- 21 These include Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines (Paris, 1966); translated as The Order of Things (London, 1974), L'Archéologie du savoir (Paris, 1969); translated as The Archaeology of Knowledge (London, 1974)
- 22 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Itinerary of a Thought', quoted Poster, p.332
- 23 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Détermination et Liberté', in Contat and Rybalka, Les Ecrits de Sartre (Paris, 1970), p.743
- 24 Contat and Rybalka, pp.743-744
- 25 Alex Callinicos, Althusser's Marxism (London, 1976), pp.10-16
- 26 specifically, see his notes on Hegel's Logic: V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, Volume 38, pp.85-239
- 27 Karl Marx, Early Writings (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp.425-426
- 28 Karl Marx, Surveys from Exile (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.146. For two challenging accounts of the relationship between subject and structure in this account, see Alex Callinicos, Making history (Oxford, 1987) and John Rees, "On *Making History*", International Socialism (new series) 38, (Spring, 1988), pp.83-104
- 29 Clarke, p.9
- 30 Frederic Jameson, The Prison-house of Language (Princeton, NJ, 1977), pp.5-6
- 31 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the works

Faulkner', in William Faulkner, Three Decades of Criticism,  
edited by F.J. Hoffman and O.W. Vickery (New York, 1963)

32 quoted, Poster, p.88

33 The paradox may be of my own making, as between these two texts  
Sartre wrote The Critique of Dialectical Reason, in which he  
posits the possibility of change, via the movement from seriality  
to groups-in-fusion, as an advance of the philosophy of Being and  
Nothingness.

34 Poster, p.309

35 Jean-Paul Sartre, Words (Harmondsworth,1967), pp.40-69

36 Poster, p.309

37 Poster, p.338

38 The End of the Road, p.22

39 quoted in George Steiner, Heidegger (Glasgow,1978), p.41

40 George Novack, Existentialism versus Marxism (New York, 1966),  
p.325

41 Jameson, p.viii

42 Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (London, 1980), p.4

43 Belsey, p.5

44 Belsey, p.7

45 Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London, 1976), p.114

46 Eagleton, p.114

47 Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, Materialism and Language (London,  
1977), p.51

48 Coward and Ellis, p.51

49 Coward and Ellis, p.49

50 Coward and Ellis, p.48

51 Coward and Ellis, p.52

- 52 Coward and Ellis, pp.52-53
- 53 Letters, p.19
- 54 Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (Harmondsworth, 1975), p.13
- 55 Camus, pp.12-13
- 56 Camus, p.62
- 57 The Floating Opera, p.250
- 58 Coward and Ellis, p.52
- 59 The Floating Opera, p.126
- 60 William Shakespeare, Hamlet, II,ii, 299-305
- 61 Coward and Ellis, p.44
- 62 Coward and Ellis, p.53
- 63 Coward and Ellis, p.52



- 1 John Enck, 'John Barth: an interview', Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, (1965), pp.6-7
- 2 Lawrence Wroth, 'The Maryland Muse by Ebenezer Cooke', Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, XLIV (October, 1934), pp.268-278
- 3 Philip Diser, 'The historical Ebenezer Cooke', Critique, 10 (1968), pp.48-59
- 4 The evidence for this is manifold in the works of Henry Fielding, beginning as they do with the parodic Shamela: the awareness of the possibilities continues throughout the prefatory chapters in each book of Tom Jones. It could equally well be argued that Laurence Sterne is engaged in one long and self-aware parody of the form in his writing of Tristram Shandy.
- 5 Erica Jong, Fanny(St. Albans, 1981)
- 6 Glaser-Wohrer, p.250
- 7 Enck, pp.10-11
- 8 Glaser-Wohrer, p.56
- 9 Noland, p.249
- 10 Glaser-Wohrer, p.55
- 11 The End of the Road, p.116
- 12 Morrell, pp.29-30
- 13 Tony Tanner, 'Games American Writers Play', both the lecture and the printed version have these argument as their central thesis.
- 14 Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', in The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss, eds., R. and F. DeGeorge (New York, 1972), pp.86-122
- 15 Morrell, p.30
- 16 Plato's The Republic, Everyman edition (London, 1906) Book X.

That this translation uses 'a copy of a copy' instead of 'a representation of a representation' does not in the least disguise Ebenezer Cooke's thorough-going Platonism.

- 17 John Barth, The Sot-Weed Factor (St. Albans, 1965), p.476
- 18 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.793
- 19 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.795
- 20 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.795
- 21 Morrell, p.32
- 22 Morrell, p.33
- 23 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.18
- 24 The Sot-Weed Factor, pp.82-82
- 25 Morrell, p.3
- 26 The critical works which have sought to identify what it is that makes American literature peculiarly American would include the writings of Van Wyck Brooks; Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York, 1957); Charles Feidelson, Symbolism and American Literature, (Chicago, 1953); Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, (New York, 1960); R.W.B. Lewis, The American Adam, (Chicago, 1955); Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden, (New York, 1964); Henry Nash Smith, Virgin land, (New York, 1950). There are, of course, many more works which attempt to account for the 'Americanness' of American Literature, but these works seem to me to represent the establishment of the American exceptionalist thesis in literary study. In order to do this it is, of course, necessary to exclude a different line within American criticism. That is, the cultural critics - of whom only one holds a position of any dominance within the academy today: F.O. Matthiessen.

- 27 Russell Reising, The Unusable Past (London, 1986)
- 28 Richard Chase's work, especially, demonstrates the ways in which the terms of opposition were de-politicised in the writings of the 1950s and early 1960s. The most common conceptual device in this procedure was the substitution of myth for history as a source of significance and meaning.
- 29 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.629
- 30 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.640
- 31 William Faulkner, Go Down Moses (Harmondsworth, 1960), pp.145-252
- 32 Faulkner, p.147
- 33 Michael Denning, '"The special American conditions": Marxism and American studies', *American Quarterly*, 3 38(1986) pp.362
- 34 for example: Myra Jehlen, Class and character in Faulkner's South (New York, 1976) and Michael Rogin, Subversive Genealogy: the politics and art of Herman Melville, (New York, 1983)
- 35 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.632
- 36 Clive Bush, The Dream of Reason (London, 1977), p.293
- 37 John Stark, The Literature of Exhaustion (Durham, NC, 1974), p.??
- 38 Lawrence Wroth, 'The Maryland Muse by Ebenezer Cooke', Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, XLIV (October, 1934), pp.268-278
- 39 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.257
- 40 John Smith, The Generall historie of Virginia, New England and the Summer isles (Glasgow, 1907), p.101
- 41 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.773
- 42 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.774
- 43 The Sot-Weed Factor, pp.360-361

- 44 Morrell, pp.39-40
- 45 Wesley Frank Craven, A history of the south; the southern colonies in the seventeenth century 1607-1689 (Baton Rouge, 1949) pp.193-196
- 46 D. Allan Jones, 'The game of the name in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*', Research Studies, 40 (1972), pp.220-221
- 47 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.504
- 48 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.345
- 49 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.360
- 50 Earl Rovit, 'The novel as parody: John Barth', Critique, 6 (1963) pp.77-85
- 51 see especially Henry Fielding's preface to Joseph Andrews
- 52 Morrell, pp.31-32
- 53 Jac Tharpe, John Barth: the comic sublimity of paradox (Carbondale, IL, 1974), p.34. It is, however, extremely strange within this debate to include Mann's traditional employment of the bildungsroman form alongside its various interrogations by Joyce and Musil!
- 54 Tharpe, p.36
- 55 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.71
- 56 The Sot-Weed Factor, pp.779-780
- 57 The Sot-Weed Factor, pp.280-281
- 58 The Sot-Weed Factor, pp.515-516
- 59 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.495
- 60 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.785
- 61 Tharpe, p.43
- 62 Tharpe, p.43
- 63 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.345

- 64 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.360
- 65 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.178
- 66 Glaser-Wohrer, p.96
- 67 Glaser-Wohrer, p.96
- 68 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.474
- 69 Glaser-Wohrer, p.p.98-99
- 70 Noland, p.254

- 1 Morrell, p.61
- 2 Glaser-Wohrer, p.103
- 3 Morrell, p.64
- 4 This is especially so in the three volumes of Mythologies; in studies such as his analysis of the story of Asdiwal and in his establishment of a 'score' upon which all myths can be transposed. This work is part of his more general probings into the nature of the collective unconscious.
- 5 Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature (New Haven, CT, 1974), p.65
- 6 Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature, p.65
- 7 Campbell Tatham, 'The Gilesian Monomyth; some remarks on the structure of *Giles Goat-Boy*', Genre, 3 (1970), pp.364-375
- 8 Tatham, 'The Gilesian Monomyth', p.364
- 9 Tatham, 'The Gilesian Monomyth', p.364
- 10 Tatham, 'The Gilesian Monomyth', p.368
- 11 Tatham, 'The Gilesian Monomyth', p.369
- 12 Tatham, 'The Gilesian Monomyth', p.371
- 13 Tatham, 'The Gilesian Monomyth', p.375
- 14 Raglan, The Hero, pp.178-179
- 15 Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a thousand faces (London, 1975), pp.11-12
- 16 Campbell, p.12
- 17 Campbell, pp.329-331
- 18 Scholes, Structuralism in Literature, p.67
- 19 Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory (Oxford, 1983), p.73
- 20 John Barth, Giles Goat-Boy (St. Albans, 1981), p.126
- 21 Campbell, p.12

- 22 Scholes, Structuralism in Literature, p.66
- 23 Robert Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction (Chicago, 1979), p.87
- 24 Glaser-Wohrer, pp.108-109
- 25 Morrell, p.70
- 26 Humphrey Carpenter, J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography (London, 1972),  
pp.189-190
- 27 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, p.76
- 28 Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text (Glasgow, 1979), p.148
- 29 Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text, p.145
- 30 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, p.76
- 31 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, pp.83-84
- 32 Peter Binns, "Understanding the new cold war", International  
Socialism (new series), 19(Spring 1983), p.20
- 33 Peter Binns, p.29
- 34 Giles Goat-Boy, p.85-107
- 35 Giles Goat-Boy, pp.219-  
224
- 36 The theoretical bases of this argument rest on the general  
understanding developed by Tony Cliff, State Capitalism in  
Russia (London, 1974), Chris Harman et al, International  
Socialism (old series), 100, Peter Binns, 'Understanding the New  
Cold War', 19 (1983), and in their recent collaborative work From  
Workers State to State Capitalism and numerous other articles  
produced by both them and other members of the British Socialist  
Workers Party
- 37 John Barth, 'Muse, spare me', Book Week, 26th September 1965,  
p.28
- 38 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, p.86

- 39 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, p.98
- 40 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, p.101
- 41 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, p.101
- 42 Douglas Robinson, John Barth's Giles Goat-Boy: a study,  
(Jyväskylä, Finland, 1980)
- 43 Glaser-Wohrer, p.111
- 44 Vine, pp.20-33
- 45 Morrell, p.67
- 46 Peter Mercer, 'The rhetoric of *Giles Goat-Boy*', Novel, 4 (1971),  
pp.147-158
- 47 Giles Goat-Boy, p.777
- 48 Mercer, p.156
- 49 Mercer, p.157
- 50 Mercer, p.147
- 51 Robinson, p.372
- 52 Mercer, p.147
- 53 Giles Goat-Boy, p.813
- 54 Giles Goat-Boy, p.813
- 55 Giles Goat-Boy, p.9
- 56 Norman Shrapnel, 'The Guardian', quoted on the cover of the  
Panther Granada edition of The Sot-Weed Factor
- 57 This is in no way intended to imply that post-modernist texts of  
this kind are special to the twentieth century. As Ihab Hassan  
has demonstrated, the inheritance extends back into the earliest  
years of the novel.
- 58 For example, Robinson's assertion that characters within the  
novel carry the weight of all of their allegorical connotations  
throughout. It seems to me much more in keeping with the purposes



of the text that these allegories be seen as more (and less) present at different points in the novel.

- 59 Scott Byrd, '*Giles Goat-Boy* visited', Critique, 2 (1966/67), p.110
- 60 Byrd, p.110
- 61 Giles Goat-Boy, pp.65-70
- 62 Giles Goat-Boy, p.117
- 63 Raymond Federman, Surfiction (Chicago, 1975)
- 64 William H. Gass, Fiction and the Figures of Life (New York, 1972)
- 65 This passive view of women goes unchallenged at this point in Barth's work - a small but significant example of the ways in which even work which aspires to be mythical and 'sacred' encodes the ideological and intellectual positions of the moment of its writing. The meditations in Sabbatical on the fork in the Chesapeake River and on the active role of the woman's body in the act of procreation shows how far his work has moved under a generalised pressure from the ideas of the women's movement in the last twenty years.
- 66 Giles Goat-Boy, p.717
- 67 Morrell, p.71
- 68 This supposition, unprovable at the time of writing because of the Department of English Literature at State University of New York Geneseo's inability to produce a transcript of the lecture due to a malfunctioning tape recorder(!), has since been verified by the appearance of 'Mystery and Tragedy' in John Barth, The Friday Book, (New York, 1984), pp.41-54
- 69 John Barth, 'Afterword to *Roderick Random*', in The Friday Book, pp.30-40

- 70 Giles Goat-Boy, p.117
- 71 Giles Goat-Boy, pp.336-373
- 72 Giles Goat-Boy, pp.373-374
- 73 Quoted, Morrell, p.64
- 74 Giles Goat-Boy, p.480
- 75 Giles Goat-Boy, p.488
- 76 Giles Goat-Boy, p.486
- 77 Scholes, Structuralism in Literature, p.134-138
- 78 Mercer, pp.148-157
- 79 Morrell, pp.69-70

- 1 For a useful discussion of the interrelation of these, and other, terms see Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London, 1976)
- 2 Terry Eagleton The Rape of Clarissa (Oxford, 1982),  
Fredric Jameson The Political Unconscious (London, 1981)
- 3 Georg Lukàcs, Studies in European Realism (London, 1972), p.6
- 4 Georg Lukàcs, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, (London, 1963), pp.17-46
- 5 Richard Ellmann, James Joyce (London, 1959), p.1
- 6 Marshall Berman, All that is solid melts into air (London, 1983), p.33
- 7 Frederick Engels, 'Letter to Margaret Harkness', in Marxists on Literature, edited by David Craig (Harmondsworth, 1975), p.271
- 8 Georg Lukàcs, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, p.19
- 9 Stefan Morawski, 'Mimesis - Lukàcs's Universal Principle', Science and Society, 32 (1968), pp.26-38
- 10 Isaac Deutscher, Marxism in our Time (London, 1972), p.291
- 11 Michael Lowy, Georg Lukàcs: from romanticism to bolshevism (London, 1979), p.202
- 12 F. Fortini, 'The writers' mandate and the end of anti-fascism', Screen, 15 (1974), pp.33-70
- 13 Bernd Witte, 'Benjamin and Lukàcs: historical notes on the relationship between their political and aesthetic theories', New German Critique, 5 (1975), pp.3-26
- 14 Georg Lukacs, The Destruction of Reason (London, 1980)
- 15 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy (New York, 1956)
- 16 Georg Lukàcs, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, pp.30-34
- 17 Gaylord Leroy and Ursula Beitz, 'The marxist approach to

- modernism', Journal of Modern Literature, 3 (1973/74), p.1158
- 18 Malcom Bradbury and James Macfarlane, 'The name and nature of modernism', in Modernism, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James Macfarlane (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp.47-48
- 19 Leroy and Beitz, pp.1160-1161
- 20 Gillian Rose, The Melancholy Science (London, 1978), p.115
- 21 Bertolt Brecht, 'Against Georg Lukàcs', Aesthetics and Politics, edited by Frederic Jameson (London, 1977), p.85
- 22 Rose, p.125
- 23 Brecht, pp.82-85
- 24 Alex Callinicos, Is there a future for marxism? (London, 1982), p.26
- 25 Alex Callinicos, Is there a future for marxism?, p.22
- 26 Alain Robbe-Grillet, Towards a new novel (London, 1965), p.154
- 27 Robbe-Grillet, p.156
- 28 Robbe-Grillet, p.157
- 29 Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (London, 1967), pp.100-111
- 30 Sontag, p.110
- 31 Joe David Bellamy, The new fiction (Chicago, 1974), pp.113-129
- 32 Jerome Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions 2nd edition (Chicago, 1980), p.4
- 33 I am all too aware that this is written in the mid-late '80s, and is therefore conditioned by the historical moment at which it is produced. I see the late '60s in the way I have described them at this point, even though my conscious analysis tells me that they were better days than the present.
- 34 John Barth, 'The literature of exhaustion', Atlantic Monthly

- 220 (August, 1967), pp.29-34
- 35 John Barth, 'The literature of exhaustion', p.72
- 36 John Barth, 'The literature of exhaustion', p.73
- 37 Hassan's work on the drift towards silence as a latent tendency within twentieth-century literature in general, and postmodernism in particular, is a very good summary of the arguments about this point. See especially The Dismemberment of Orpheus, (London, 1982)
- 38 John Barth, 'The literature of exhaustion', p.74
- 39 John Barth, 'The literature of exhaustion', p.75
- 40 John Barth, 'The literature of exhaustion', p.78
- 41 John Barth, 'The literature of exhaustion', p.79
- 42 John Barth, 'The literature of exhaustion', p.79
- 43 Preston, pp.97-98
- 44 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.135
- 45 In an interview on Kaleidoscope, BBC Radio 4, 28th November 1984

- 1 Marshall Berman, All that is solid melts into air (London, 1983)
- 2 John Barth, Lost in the Funhouse (New York, 1968), p.ix
- 3 Lost in the Funhouse, p.ix
- 4 John Barth, The literature of exhaustion, p.30
- 5 Lost in the Funhouse, p.x
- 6 Lost in the Funhouse, p.x
- 7 Tharpe, p.93
- 8 Tharpe, p.93
- 9 Lost in the Funhouse, p.8
- 10 Lost in the Funhouse, p.12
- 11 Tharpe, p.94
- 12 Lost in the Funhouse, p.29
- 13 Lost in the Funhouse, p.15
- 14 Lost in the Funhouse, p.30
- 15 Lost in the Funhouse, p.20
- 16 Lost in the Funhouse, p.31
- 17 Lost in the Funhouse, p.32
- 18 Lost in the Funhouse, pp.ix-x
- 19 Lost in the Funhouse, p.33
- 20 Morrell, p.90
- 21 Lost in the Funhouse, p.34
- 22 Not because they are actually masturbatory, but because they are  
part of the hidden world of sexuality from which the hero feels  
excluded.
- 23 Lost in the Funhouse, p.53
- 24 Lost in the Funhouse, p.54
- 25 Tony Tanner, 'No Exit', Partisan Review, 34 (1969), p.291

- 26 Alfred Appel, 'The Art of Artifice', in Critical essays on John Barth, edited by Joseph Waldmeir, p.181
- 27 The distinction between these two terms is based on the work of Gerard Genette, particularly Narrative Discourse, and will be taken up in greater detail in the following chapter.
- 28 Raymond Federman, Surfiction (Chicago, 1975), p.12  
This method can be seen at its most obvious in Tom Robbins' Still Life with Woodpecker at the point at which the typewriter breaks down and the author is forced to complete his text by writing in longhand.
- 29 Lost in the Funhouse, pp.69-70  
Of which it is said "it is an illusion that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means" which reference lifts the text out of the realm of realist fiction
- 30 Lost in the Funhouse, p.71
- 31 Lost in the Funhouse, p.71
- 32 Edgar H. Knapp, 'Found in the Barthouse: the novelist as savior' quoted in Waldmeir, Critical essays on John Barth, p.187
- 33 Lost in the Funhouse, p.73
- 34 Lost in the Funhouse, p.75
- 35 Lost in the Funhouse, p.77
- 36 Lost in the Funhouse, p.92
- 37 Morrell, pp.83-84
- 38 John Barth, 'Help: a stereophonic narrative', Esquire, 72 (September 1969), pp.108-109
- 39 Lost in the Funhouse, p.102
- 40 Lost in the Funhouse, p.104

- 41 Lost in the Funhouse, p.106
- 42 Lost in the Funhouse, p.107
- 43 Lost in the Funhouse, p.110
- 44 Christopher Morris, 'Barth and Lacan: the world of the Moebius strip', Critique, 17 (1975/76), pp.69-77
- 45 Clayton Koelb, 'John Barth's *Glossolalia*', Comparative Literature, 26 (1974), pp.334-345. This idea has, of course, been subjected to a vigorous critique by many of Koelb's predecessors, not least among these being Wordsworth.
- 46 Koelb, p.339
- 47 Lost in the Funhouse, p.xi
- 48 Lost in the Funhouse, p.xi
- 49 Glaser-Wohrer, pp.177-178
- 50 Roland Barthes, S/Z (London, 1975), p.3
- 51 A clear and concise introduction to the thought of Jacques Derrida, particularly his ideas on the metaphysics of presence, is contained within Catherine Belsey's Critical Practice
- 52 Lost in the Funhouse, p.ix
- 53 Lost in the Funhouse, p.12
- 54 John Barth, The Literature of exhaustion, p.33
- 55 Lost in the Funhouse, p.116  
Who can this be other than Germaine, Lady Amherst from Letters?
- 56 Lost in the Funhouse, p.123
- 57 Lost in the Funhouse, p.125
- 58 Lost in the Funhouse, p.150
- 59 Lost in the Funhouse, p.148
- 60 Lost in the Funhouse, p.ix



- 61 Lost in the Funhouse, p.138
- 62 Lost in the Funhouse, p.161
- 63 Lost in the Funhouse, p.131
- 64 Lost in the Funhouse, p.131
- 65 Lost in the Funhouse, p.148
- 66 The Literature of exhaustion, p.34
- 67 Lost in the Funhouse, p.150
- 68 Lost in the Funhouse, p.162
- 69 Lost in the Funhouse, p.156
- 70 William J. Krier, '*Lost in the Funhouse*: "A continuing, strange love letter"', Boundary 2, 5 (1976), pp.103-116
- 71 Krier, p.107
- 72 Krier, p.110
- 73 Harold Farwell, 'John Barth's tenuous affirmation; the absurd, unending possibility of love', Georgia Review, 28 (1974), pp.290-306
- 74 Lost in the Funhouse, p.149
- 75 Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (London, 1958)
- 76 Lost in the Funhouse, p.172
- 77 Tharpe, p.102
- 78 Lost in the Funhouse, p.186
- 79 Lost in the Funhouse, p.188
- 80 Lost in the Funhouse, p.186
- 81 Lost in the Funhouse, p.193
- 82 Lost in the Funhouse, p.193
- 83 Lost in the Funhouse, p.188
- 84 Lost in the Funhouse, p.ix

- 85 Tharpe, p.94
- 86 Ihab Hassan, The Dismemberment of Orpheus (London, 1982)
- 87 Anne Mangel, 'Maxwell's Demon, entropy, information: *The crying of Lot-49*', Tri-Quarterly, 20 (1971), pp.194-208
- 88 Jan Marta, 'John Barth's portrait of the artist as a fiction', Canadian Review of Comparative Literature, (1982), p.214
- 89 Marta, p.214
- 90 John Barth, 'Hawkes and Barth talk about fiction', New York Times Review of Books, (April 1, 1979), p.7

- 1 John Barth, Chimera (St. Albans, 1981)
- 2 Chimera, p.202
- 3 Chimera, p.203
- 4 Jerry Bryant, 'The novel looks at itself - again', in Waldmeir, Critical Essays on John Barth, p.213
- 5 Cynthia Davis, '"The key to the treasure"; narrative movements and effects in *Chimera*', in Waldmeir, Critical Essays on John Barth, p.223
- 6 Jerry Powell, 'John Barth's *Chimera*: a creative reponse to the literature of exhaustion', in Waldmeir, Critical Essays on John Barth, p.229
- 7 Tharpe, p.109
- 8 See also p 219 for another version of this idea.
- 9 Tharpe, p.108
- 10 R.A. Brower, 'The heresy of plot', in Elder Olson, Aristotle's Poetics and English literature, p.167
- 11 Brower, p.167
- 12 Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse (Oxford, 1980)
- 13 Robert Scholes, Structuralism in literature, p.63
- 14 Genette, pp.196-197
- 15 Culler, Structuralist Poetics, p.208
- 16 Culler, Structuralist Poetics, p.208
- 17 Genette, p.27
- 18 Chimera, p.203
- 19 Chimera, p.308
- 20 Genette, p.27
- 21 Genette, p.26

- 22 Davis, p.222
- 23 Chimera, p.24
- 24 Chimera, p.24 I quote this passage on two occasions so close together because part of the effect I am trying to describe at this point depends precisely upon the ability to read the same passage in two ways; first, as part of Dunyazade's speech, and secondly as a contribution to the self-conscious self-description in which the text engages.
- 25 Chimera, p.23
- 26 Chimera, p.8
- 27 Chimera, p.10
- 28 Chimera, p.19
- 29 Martin Gardner, 'The multiple fascinations of the Fibonacci sequence', Scientific American, (March, 1969), pp.116-120
- 30 Chimera, p.61
- 31 Chimera, p.61
- 32 Christian Metz, quoted in Genette, p.33
- 33 Chimera, p.97
- 34 Chimera, p.103
- 35 Genette, p.33
- 36 Chimera, p.59
- 37 Chimera, pp.133-134
- 38 Davis, p.221
- 39 Glaser-Wohrer, p.201
- 40 Bryant, p.213
- 41 Bryant, p.216
- 42 Powell, p.229

- 43 Giles Goat-Boy, pp.253-254
- 44 Davis, p.224
- 45 Davis, p.224
- 46 Powell, p.230
- 47 Roland Barthes, S/Z, p.3
- 48 Powell, p.235
- 49 Kierman Ryan, 'Reclaiming the canon', Literature Teaching Politics, 3(1984), pp.4-17
- 50 Powell, p.229
- 51 Max Kozloff, 'American painting during the cold war', Artforum (May 1973), pp.38-46
- 52 Ryan, p.17
- 53 Gerald Graff, 'An ideological map of American literary criticism' Revue Francaise d'Etudes Americaines, viii, 16(February 1983), p112
- 54 Philip Rahv, 'The myth and the powerhouse', Partisan Review 20 (1953), p.637
- 55 I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which this aesthetic crisis spilled over into Barth's more general social thinking in my unpublished lecture entitled "John Barth and the rhetoric of the cold war", delivered at King's College, London 22/10/1987

- 1 John Barth, Letters, p.45
- 2 Theo D'Haen, Text to reader, p.44
- 3 Max Schulz, 'Barth, *Letters* and the great tradition' in Novel vs fiction: the contemporary reformation, ed. by J. Cope & G. Green p.112
- 4 Letters, p.767
- 5 Godfrey Singer, The epistolary novel, p.195
- 6 I mean specifically epistolary fiction at this point, as opposed to epistolary literature in general, which could have different epistemological status and therefore a whole *different* set of problems and difficulties in this area.
- 7 Terry Eagleton, The rape of Clarissa, p.25
- 8 Charles Kany, The beginnings of the epistolary novel in France, Italy and Spain, p.23
- 9 John Barth, The literature of exhaustion, p.74
- 10 John Barth, The literature of replenishment, p.203
- 11 The literature of replenishment, p.203
- 12 D'Haen, p.65
- 13 Schulz, p.109
- 14 Letters, p.19
- 15 D'Haen, pp.64-65
- 16 Schulz, pp.112-113
- 17 See my earlier remarks on the role of numerology and cryptology in the chapter on Chimera
- 18 John Barth, 'Speaking of *Letters*', in The Friday Book, p.173
- 19 Letters, p.768
- 20 Barth, 'Speaking of *Letters*', p.176

- 21 Barth, 'Speaking of *Letters*', pp.176-177
- 22 Josephine Hendin, '*Letters*: a novel by John Barth', New Republic  
(December 1st, 1979), p.32-33
- 23 Letters, pp.14-15
- 24 Letters, p.19
- 25 Letters, p.39
- 26 Letters, p.44
- 27 Letters, p.42
- 28 Letters, p.49
- 29 Charlie Reilly, 'An interview with John Barth', Contemporary  
Literature 22(1981), p.8
- 30 Reilly, p.12
- 31 Reilly, p.12
- 32 Letters, p.59
- 33 Letters, pp.72-73
- 34 Letters, p.80
- 35 Letters, pp.88-89
- 36 Reilly, p.17
- 37 Francis Parkman, The Conspiracy of Pontiac, pp.477-478
- 38 Parkman, p.487
- 39 Schulz, p.99
- 40 Letters, pp.189-190
- 41 Letters, p.251
- 42 Letters, p.254
- 43 Letters, p.217
- 44 Reilly, pp.14-15
- 45 Letters, p.277

- 46 The historical accuracy of this material can easily be checked  
in J. Christopher Herold, Mistress to an age; F. Debo, A history  
of the Indians in the United States of America; Leon Howard,  
'Joel Barlow and Napoleon', Huntington Library Quarterly 1938/39  
pp.37-51
- 47 Letters, p.307
- 48 Letters, pp.282-283
- 49 Letters, p.298
- 50 Letters, p.300
- 51 Letters, p.288
- 52 Letters, p.324
- 53 Letters, p.303
- 54 Gerald Graff, Literature against Itself, p.33
- 55 Letters, p.336
- 56 Letters, p.341
- 57 Letters, p.363
- 58 Letters, p.354
- 59 Letters, p.381
- 60 Letters, p.427
- 61 Letters, p.429
- 62 Reilly, p.14
- 63 Letters, pp.435-436
- 64 The convolution of this joke is that the Richardson letter from  
1758 concerning the death of the novel has long since  
disappeared.
- 65 Letters, pp.447-448
- 66 Letters, p.445



- 67 Letters, p.438
- 68 Letters, p.453
- 69 Letters, p.472
- 70 Letters, p.473
- 71 Letters, p.481
- 72 Miriam Allott, Novelists on the novel, p.45
- 73 Letters, p.493
- 74 Letters, pp. 46-47, & 483
- 75 Letters, p.526
- 76 Letters, p.534
- 77 Letters, p.534
- 78 Letters, p.550
- 79 Letters, p.555
- 80 Letters, p.550
- 81 Letters, p.556
- 82 Letters, pp.551-552
- 83 Letters, p.560
- 84 Letters, p.562
- 85 Letters, p.579
- 86 Letters, p.581
- 87 Letters, p.636
- 88 Letters, p.654
- 89 Letters, p.650
- 90 Letters, p.650
- 91 Letters, p.652
- 92 Letters, p.653
- 93 Letters, p.683

- 94 Letters, p.668
- 95 Letters, p.704
- 96 Letters, p.733
- 97 Letters, p.747
- 98 Tsevtan Todorov, The poetics of prose, p.110
- 99 Todorov, p.130
- 100 Patricia Waugh, Metafiction, p.19
- 101 Waugh, p.21

- 1 These terms are drawn from the various critical works which have addressed themselves to an analysis and description of the phenomenon I have chosen to call, at different moments, post-modernism and postmodernism.
- 2 Ihab Hassan, 'Joyce, Beckett, and the postmodern imagination', Tri-Quarterly, 34 (1975), p.191
- 3 The literature of replenishment, p.197
- 4 Graff, pp.207-208
- 5 The literature of replenishment, p.199
- 6 Charles Newman, The Post-Modern Aura, p.187
- 7 Ronald Sukenick, 'The new tradition', Partisan Review, 39 (1972) p.580
- 8 Jerome Klinkowitz, p.ix
- 9 Berman, All that is solid melts into air, p.33
- 10 The literature of replenishment, p.200
- 11 Richard Brautigan, Trout Fishing in America (London, 1972) pp.150-151
- 12 Linda Hutcheon, Narcissistic narrative (London, 1984), p.25
- 13 in, especially, Paracriticisms: seven speculations of the times (Chicago, 1975). Charles Newman suggests that the first 'sacerdotal' use of postmodern can be attributed to, of all people, Arnold Toynbee! Newman, p.21
- 14 Hassan, 'Joyce, Beckett, and the postmodern imagination', p.192
- 15 Fredric Jameson, The prison house of language, (Princeton, NJ, 1972), p.5
- 16 Ihab Hassan, Paracriticisms: seven speculations of the times (London, 1975), p.47

- 17 Sukenick, 'The new tradition', p.581
- 18 Sukenick, 'The new tradition', p.584
- 19 The Sot-Weed Factor, pp.360-361
- 20 Giles Goat-Boy, p.770
- 21 A charge most obviously made by Gardner in On Moral fiction
- 22 Lost in the Funhouse, p.148
- 23 The literature of replenishment, p.205
- 24 The literature of replenishment, p.203
- 25 The literature of replenishment, p.205
- 26 The End of the Road, p.116
- 27 Although this argument is not to the point here, it is worth remembering both that Barth was educated in the period of post-war anti-intellectualism and that even marxists like James T. Farrell were heavily influenced by pragmatism and attempted to wed Trotskyist politics to Dewey's philosophy in the '30s and early '40s.
- 28 Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics (Glasgow, 1974), p.113
- 29 Ihab Hassan, The right promethean fire (Chicago, 1980), p.183
- 30 The Sot-Weed Factor, p.615
- 31 Ihab Hassan, The Dismemberment of Orpheus (London, 1982), p.264

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- , 'The literature of replenishment', *Atlantic Monthly*  
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- , 'Muse, spare me', *Book Week*, (26 September 1965),  
pp.28-29
- , 'Help, a stereophonic narrative', *Esquire*, 72 (September,  
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